

That "Clutch" Thing

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Sunday, January 18 2009 7:00 PM -

Almost since he came into the league, LeBron has been chased by the charge that he shrinks a little bit in the clutch, or at any rate he can't compare to the game's ultimate closer- Kobe Bryant, who LeBron and the Cavaliers will face Monday night in Los Angeles. As we get set for tonight's mega-showdown between the Cavs and Lakers at 10:30 PM on TNT, Jesse looks into the reality of LeBron's clutch performances, and why comparisons of last second shot percentages between he and Kobe aren't very fair.



During the overtime portion of Cleveland's 102-93 loss to the Bulls last Thursday- a loss marked by LeBron James going back-iron on a potential game-winning jump shot in the final seconds of regulation- TNT informed the viewing public that LBJ is 3-for-22 for his career on shots to win or tie in the last five seconds of regular-season games, good for a cool 13.6 percent. I don't know where the number came from- it can't be found in the Clutch Statistics section of LeBron's [player page](#)

on

82games.com

, at least. Someone out there is being paid by TNT to come up with those kinds of tidbits. (I want that job, if it exists.)

With such a paucity of shots, it's easy to recall them from memory. The first came on March 22, 2006, a twenty-footer from the top of the key to break an overtime tie with the Bobcats. The second, [a virtually identical shot](#), beat the Hornets

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103-101 in O.K. City three weeks later. The third, a three-point [prayer](#)

to tie the Bulls at the end of regulation in a game the Cavaliers eventually lost, came last season. There are two in the playoffs: Games

[3](#) and 5 of 2006 Washington series. And that's it: five shots, regular season and playoffs, four of which came in one six-week stretch. (The dunk that tied Game 5 of the '07 East Finals came with nine seconds left.) If I'm missing any, let me know. I don't think I am.

Almost since he came into the league, LeBron has been chased by the charge that he shrinks a little bit in the clutch, or at any rate he can't compare to the game's ultimate closer- Kobe Bryant, who LeBron and the Cavaliers will face Monday night in Los Angeles. Whenever LeBron and Kobe are compared- which is often- it usually comes down to that ephemeral ability in the clutch. And there, the judgment has almost always come down in favor of Kobe. Time after time, even as pundits praise LeBron's floor game, physical gifts, and maturity, they invariably hedge their bets in favor of the Son of Jellybean. *"Much as I love LeBron, if I need to win a game in the fourth quarter, I'm going with #24."*

Even LeBron, has always gone out of his way to call Kobe "the best player in our league," doing so based largely on Kobe's peerless ability to take over in the clutch. LeBron has compared *himself* unfavorably to the L.A. star in this aspect. "I don't want to kill everyone," LBJ once said, unlike the assassin in Forum Blue & Gold. Now, LeBron can teach Metternich a few lessons in diplomacy, and there's no need to kill everyone when he can settle for killing Kobe with kindness. But actions speak louder than words. And LeBron had no visible issue with letting Kobe handle the scoring load down the stretch in Team USA's gold-medal victory over Spain- which he did, brilliantly.

I'm not foolish enough to deny Kobe's ability to step up in the clutch, [a few hiccups](#) [her](#)
[e and there](#)
[notwithstanding](#)

. But nor should anyone be foolish enough to doubt LeBron's bona-fides with the

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game on the line. Shrinking violets don't score 29 of their team's last 30 points in conference finals games. Clutch plays can be made throughout a game, not just in the closing seconds, and LeBron has made countless numbers of those, whether by scoring the ball, passing it, rebounding it, defending it, or stealing it. A guy who handles the mantle of leadership and responsibility with the aplomb of LeBron isn't someone who freezes up under pressure. There's a difference between coming up short and choking. LeBron has come up short on occasion, and he will come up short on occasion in the future. But he's no choker. It's not that complicated.

In fact, it's downright simple. LeBron James isn't very proficient on late-game shot-attempts because he isn't a proficient shooter off the dribble. It's the weakest part of his game. Every pull-up J by LBJ is a classic "No-no-no-yes!" shot- appropriately enough, Cavaliers shooting coach Chris Jent was the all-time king of the "No-no-no-yes!" when he played at Ohio State- and that's at any point in the game, not just in the last five seconds. Add in:

- the non-existent ball movement inherent in "Lelso,"
- the fact that the goal of getting a *good* shot is often secondary to the goal of getting the *last* shot, regardless of quality, in late-game situations,
- that teams will generally take away the drive in those situations,
- and that the officials generally ignore contact on the drive,

...and you get a number like 3-for-22, which, by the way, represents two-tenths of one percent of LeBron's exactly 9,000 career shot attempts, just in case you're reading too much into it.

I would ask, "So why don't they let Mo Williams- a guy who can create his own shot and is a more reliable from outside than LeBron- run the offense in these situations?" Except that there's no point in asking. LeBron is a superstar, and in the NBA the superstar runs the show in the last seconds, even if his jump shot has the consistency of a Latin American stock exchange. That's just the way it is.

At any rate, it isn't about clutch, or killer instinct, or turning it on when it counts, or any of the other clichés. LeBron has nothing to prove there. He's stepped up on

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the big stage. He's accepted the obligations of superstardom. He's brought a franchise back from the dead- a challenge ole' Killer Kobe would have run screaming from, judging by his reaction to being drafted by Charlotte in 1996.

He just isn't a shooter. He isn't Kobe. He isn't [Reggie Miller](#) . Hell, he isn't [Sleepy Floyd](#)

The buzzer-beater is a job for a cutlass. LeBron James is a hammer. And if he's not the precise weapon you need inside five seconds, well, at least he's pretty effective in the first 47:55.