

# THE JUMP-SHOT REVOLUTION

BY SHAWN FURY

**WATCHING** the Golden State Warriors play the Cleveland Cavaliers on Christmas Day, many NBA fans were surprised to hear the ABC sports commentator Mark Jackson say that Stephen Curry, the superstar point guard of the Warriors, had “hurt the game.” Mr. Jackson quickly explained: “What I mean by that is that I go into these high school gyms, I watch these kids, and the first thing they do is run to the 3-point line.” The long-distance shots at which the Warriors star excels were not appropriate for them, Mr. Jackson suggested: “You are not Steph Curry.”

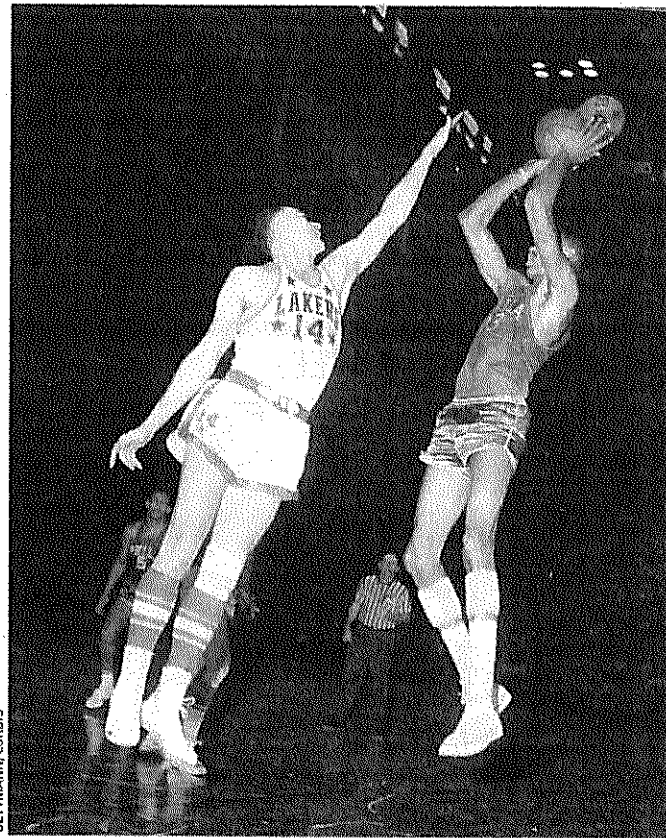
This is not the first time that a revolutionary player has been accused of damaging basketball with his talent, but to discover precedents for the majestic Mr. Curry, you have to travel back to the creation of the most important innovation in the game’s history: the jump shot. From the time the jumper appeared in different regions of the country in the 1930s, people have worried about its impact, fearing a future where shooters could rule from the air.

## Early critics said that the shot ruined teamwork.

It’s impossible to name any one creator of the jump shot, but once it appeared, it brought chaos to a previously controlled game. In the early 20th century, basketball offenses featured weaves and passes until an open player could fire a set shot—both feet firmly planted on the ground—with two hands.

Many of the first jump shooters also kept both hands on the ball, but by jumping off the court, they redefined what was possible. They held the ball over their head as they leapt, making their shots impossible to block. The famed coach Phog Allen of the University of Kansas called the new move unfair, but pioneers of the shot quickly set scoring records.

In the early 1930s, Glenn Roberts of Virginia’s Emory & Henry College averaged nearly 20 points a game, a solid total for an entire team in an era that featured a jump ball at center court after each basket. Like many of his fellow trendsetters, Roberts didn’t square up to the basket like set shooters. He started with his back to the bucket and twisted in midair before shooting. Newspapers called him “Houdini” because of his magical jump shot.



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WILT CHAMBERLAIN (right) takes a shot, San Francisco, Jan. 1960.

Eventually the two-handed jump shot favored by Roberts and others disappeared like the set shot, and the one-handed jumper ruled. Traditionalists continued to worry about its expanding influence. Hall of Famer Dick McGuire, a star for the New York Knicks in the 1950s, believed that the jump shot gave individuals too much power, robbing the game of teamwork. Now a single player with a

crafty dribble and a leaping one-hander could dominate.

Kenny Sailors was one such innovator. As a teenager on the family farm in Wyoming, he learned the jump shot while battling his older, taller brother. Most agree that he is the father of the modern jumper. His one-handed shot—launched after Sailors pulled up off the dribble, his right hand under the ball, his left acting as

the traditional guide hand—carried the University of Wyoming to the NCAA national championship in 1943.

By the mid-1950s, shooters like Sailors were no longer oddities. As the popularity of the jump shot spread, basketball turned into a high-scoring spectacle. In 1954, the legendary coach Joe Lapchick neatly described the new problem facing defenders: A jump shooter “knows when he’s going to jump and you don’t.”

Consider the impact of the shot on college basketball. Starting in 1939, the first 11 NCAA national championship games featured an average score of 49.1-39.2. By the following decade (1950-59), scoring had increased by an order of magnitude, with the title game averaging 74.9-66.2.

Yet critics still ridiculed the tactic. Former Notre Dame coach Moose Krause advocated making the ball bigger to make shooting more difficult. He believed that basketball had become too easy by 1957 and “gets less and less interesting every year.”

Instead the jump shot’s influence only grew, and today the incomparable Stephen Curry, with his long-distance attack, is the most fascinating player in basketball. It turns out that, in transforming the game, Mr. Curry has company, even if his fellow revolutionaries haven’t played for 60 years.

*Mr. Fury is the author of “Rise and Fire: The Origins, Science and Evolution of the Jump Shot—and How It Transformed Basketball Forever,” which will be published later this month by Flatiron Books.*