



HAWKS

Kyle Korver vs. perfection

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Published 4:21 p.m. ET Feb. 2, 2015 | Updated 6:16 p.m. ET Feb. 3, 2015

Where does a basketball player find the perfect shot? In a gym? A high-tech sports science and medical lab? On a paddleboard on the ocean? In marriage? Mind? Body? In a system that accentuates three-point shooting?

For Atlanta Hawks guard Kyle Korver, the best three-pointer shooter in the NBA, it is all of those places and more.

But let's start on the Pacific Ocean two summers ago.

Korver participated in his first misogi, the grueling practice of pushing oneself beyond boundaries in unfamiliar territories. His quest: paddleboard about 25 miles from the Channel Islands to Santa Barbara, Calif.

An inexperienced paddleboarder, Korver said he fell 45 seconds into the voyage. His toes bled, and after 90 minutes, he was miserable.

"But eventually," he said, "you hit a point where, 'We're not going to turn around. We're not going to stop. How do we do this?' "

He began searching for the perfect stroke.

"I started breaking down every single little detail of this simple stroke and tried to make it perfect. Get one perfect stroke and try to do it again. And just got lost in trying to perfect the stroke," he said. "I focused on one detail and after 100 strokes, that didn't feel like a detail anymore. That felt natural.

"There was a smaller detail after that. I found a new detail and then a new detail and then a new detail. Eventually I was stroking, and eventually I wasn't that tired.

"That exercise of finding that stroke was revolutionary to me in shooting. You take the same concept of the stroke and do it with your shot."

Zen and the art and science of the three-point shot, by Kyle Korver.

Korver, who turns 34 on March 17, is having his best season at an age when most players aren't getting better. If Dwyane Wade can't play in the All-Star Game because of an injury, Korver is a logical commissioner's choice to replace him.

He set a record last season for most consecutive games with a made three-pointer at 127 and is flourishing with the Hawks, a key reason why the Eastern Conference leaders were running on a 19-game winning streak and stand at 40-8 entering Monday's game against New Orleans.

San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich called Korver the best shooter in the league. He leads the league in three-point shooting percentage (53.7%) and is on pace to become the first player in NBA history to shoot at least 50% from the field, 50% on three-pointers and 90% on free throws.

But this is not a story about numbers, impressive as they are. This is a story about a man's obsessive pursuit of the perfect shot.

Korver loves shooting, and he loves talking shooting.

"To be a great shooter, to be a consistent shooter, which is what constitutes a great shooter — the goal is to make your shot exactly the same every single time," he said.

He has made three-pointers seem easier than they are. "If you shoot it with all the leverage you have in your mechanics — using your legs and your technique — there's a way to make a three-point shot feel like it's not as far," he said.

This season is as close as Korver has felt to taking the same shot every time. "This is the best I've ever shot, for sure," he said. "There's a lot of reasons for it. As you get older, you

should just become a better shooter. You've shot more shots."

Korver has a 20-point checklist that helps him determine how sound his shot is. "It's things I've identified that are keys to my shot," Korver said.

1. Wide stance.
2. Exaggerated legs.
3. Drop through heels.
4. Engage core.
5. Slight bend at waist.
6. Up strong.
7. Elbow straight.
8. One hand.
9. Fingers spread.
10. Slight pause.
11. Elbow up.
12. Land forward.
13. See the top of the rim.
14. Ball on fingertips.
15. Strong shot.
16. Shoulders forward and relaxed.
17. Ball and arm risen straight.
18. Hold the follow through.
19. Keep the release point high.
20. On turns, square shoulders.

"I'm not going to check every single one of them every time," Korver said. "There's a certain point, a certain feel I'm trying to get to every day. Some things, you do more naturally. Some things, I have to think about them. As I'm shooting, I have this list in the back of my head, and I know I'm not doing one or two of them. Once I feel I get all 20 of them clicking, then I'm going to have natural rhythm in my shot."

It took time for Korver to develop that list. Some of it is self-explanatory to great shooters, and some of it is specific to Korver, especially as he worked through injuries to his wrist, elbow and knee — all key components to a mechanically sound shot.

Those injuries prevented Korver from performing the way he wanted. Beyond the pain, he was frustrated.

"I saw some clips of me shooting in Utah. I was just like, 'That's gross.' It was so sloppy, and I was so disgusted with myself," Korver said. "When you go through a couple of seasons where you can't use your knee and you're trying to play basketball and it affects how you shoot and it affects how you feel about the game, it's just not fun playing hurt.

"Then all of sudden, you find out information that can change all that and I was all in."

Enter P3 — Peak Performance Project — a sports science and medical lab in Santa Barbara led by Marcus Elliott, a graduate of Harvard Medical School. P3 specializes in identifying the body's weak spots before they become issues.

"We use more technology and data to design precise training programs and precise injury-prevention programs for our athletes," Elliott said.

Skeptical of the outbreak of "shot doctors," Korver has never had a shooting coach. Instead, Elliott taught Korver how to use his body to his advantage.

Using motion-capture cameras that record more than 5,000 data points on the body, Elliott discovered Korver wasn't loading his right knee, back and elbow properly. He also wasn't using elasticity — using flexibility to create greater energy — to his advantage.

Elliott put a program in place to fix those issues. Using motion-capture cameras, Korver saw his testing with all the problems and then saw improvement when re-tested. It's about \$5,000 a week for an NBA player at P3, worth it for a player such as Korver.

"It's been a lot of years trying to fix everything in my body. I got results pretty quickly," Korver said. "The light clicked on. I need to know this stuff, about my body and how it can work more properly."

Elliott led Korver to the misogi, too, and Korver's passion for the challenge is profound. Last summer, Korver, Elliott and three others participated in an underwater five-kilometer relay in which each person carried an 80-pound rock as far as they could and dropped it for the next person to do the same until they covered 5K.

"The thought process behind it all is when you're young or for our kids, we want them to think everything's possible," Korver said. "If you put in the work, anything is possible. As we get older, what do we do? We go the other way. That's just not healthy.

"As I was getting older, I said, 'Do I just want to spot up in the corner or do I want to keep working on my game? Do I want to keep thinking things are possible or do I want to be comfortable right here?' I'm in. I get it. "

But all the checklists, high-tech biofeedback and misogi challenges couldn't have equaled the life-changing effects of his 2011 marriage.

"(P3) and being married to my wife (Juliet) have changed the trajectory of my career," Korver said. "She has been such a stabilizing and grounding force for me. She's a source of strength, a source of wisdom, companionship. She's my best friend. It is obvious, the year I got married my career started going that way."

Ask teammates and coaches to tell a Korver shooting story, and smiles break out.

Except for Hawks forward DeMarre Carroll. He's still demoralized by a shooting contest against Korver last summer. Seven spots around the three-point line, five shots from each spot.

"You would think he would miss one, but he didn't miss one. That's my testimony," Carroll said. "It's remarkable. I ended up quitting that contest. It told me I need to get in the gym more."

Hawks forward Elton Brand remembers a scouting report he received at the start of the playoffs in 2012 when he played for the Philadelphia 76ers and Korver played for the Chicago Bulls.

"The scouting report was based on *Kyle Korver*," Brand said, almost questioning the validity of the report. "They had Derrick Rose, Joakim Noah, Carlos Boozer. And we were worried about Kyle Korver, trapping him and getting the ball out of his hands. I played with him last season and then I understood why. He's an amazing shooter. ... It's unreal."

Atlanta is Korver's fourth team (the 76ers, Jazz and Bulls are the others) in 12 NBA seasons, and he has found a home in Hawks coach Mike Budenholzer's offense, which emphasizes ball movement and versatility on the perimeter and in the lane.

Atlanta guard Kent Bazemore loved it when Korver launched a deep three against the Wizards this season. "He pulls up from like 30-feet and just hits the bottom of the net. Caught it right in rhythm. Rolls up and bang. The place went crazy," Bazemore said.

Fans appreciate Korver's threes. "If he misses, it's like 'ahhhh,'" Brand said.

The Hawks love Korver's threes, too. Pay attention when Korver shoots a three-pointer in front of the Hawks bench. Before he shoots and sometimes before he even gets into his shooting motion, players on the bench being celebrating. They clear a little space for him so they're not crowding him. Dennis Schroder has his towel ready to start waving. Mike Muscala makes three-point goggles with his hands. Bazemore is ready for a fist pump.

Hawks forward Mike Scott recalled a game three seasons ago. The Hawks trailed the Boston Celtics 48-21 in the second quarter, but Korver made eight of 10 three-pointers in the second half, leading Atlanta to an overtime victory.

"It's automatic," Scott said.

You could say that about the shooting of several basketball players in Korver's family.

His three brothers played college ball — Klayton at Drake, Kaleb at Creighton, where Kyle played, and Kirk at Missouri-Kansas City. Cousin Kari Korver plays for UCLA, and she's shooting almost 40% on threes this season. Uncle Kris Korver is the men's basketball coach at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa.

Korver's mom, Laine, scored 74 points in a high school game. "My mom gets a bunch of love because she scored 74 points in a game. But my dad (Kevin) can shoot the lights out,"

Korver said, explaining the tight spin his dad puts on the ball on each shot. "He shoots a super tight football spiral. He shoots it so soft."

A lifetime of basketball and the pursuit of the perfect shot have made Korver one of the most accurate three-point shooters in NBA history. He's No. 6 on the all-time three-point shooting percentage list, and it's easy to imagine Korver shooting 1,000 shots a day. Not the case.

"I don't ever shoot a ton of shots at once because I want to shoot them game-like," Korver said. "You can't shoot 500 shots at the exact speed and exact intensity that you're going to in a game.

"Very rarely will I shoot more than 150 shots at once."

He has four opportunities to feel good about his shot on gameday: during the morning shoot-around, after the morning shoot-around, during his pregame routine and during warmups just before tip-off.

"That helps me more than shooting a ton of shots at once and trying to find this rhythm that everyone talks about," Korver said. "I want to seek perfection. Four times during that day, that's what I'm trying to do."

His high-energy pregame routine is worth watching and if you have a ticket to a Hawks game — home or away — you can watch it. He begins his routine about 50 minutes before game time with player development coaches passing, defending and setting screens.

Korver takes shots from several spots on the court, including several spots around the three-point arc. The routine is tailored to the Hawks' offense, and Korver has to make a certain number of shots before he can move to the next spot.

Most players won't leave the floor on a miss. Korver isn't most guys.

He can't leave the court without making 10 consecutive free throws and three consecutive three-pointers from the top of the arc. One miss and he starts over.

"Ten in a row, three in a row," Korver said. "I've done that for a while. If I make all of my shots, I can have it done in less than 10 minutes — eight or nine minutes if I miss two, three, four shots."

As Korver runs toward the locker room after his pregame workout, a Hawks security officer is waiting with a Sharpie marker. He gives it to Korver, who begins signing autographs.

"I have to be in the locker room 32 minutes before the game," Korver said. "So if I make all my shots, I have more time to sign autographs. I'll sign until I need to run into the locker room."

Running into the locker room, running onto the court, running in the ocean, always in search of the perfect shot. And, there's this intriguing possibility.

"I feel," Korver said, "like I can get better."