

“Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.” That’s what the great actor Will Rogers used to say.

Memphis Grizzlies guard Vince Carter is one of those NBA players who was born on the right track thanks primarily to his being blessed with otherworldly athleticism. For most of his career, it seemed like he could get anywhere on the court at any time he wanted and do whatever he wanted. He was called Half-Man Half-Amazing for a reason.

It’s hard to believe, but Carter is about to turn 40 years old in a week, and remarkably, he’s still relevant after all these years. For example, he still sports an above-average WS/48 (win shares per 48 minutes) this season, according to Basketball Reference. Most NBA players get run over by the metaphorical train long before reaching 40, but Carter’s continual reinvention of his game has enabled him to keep playing meaningful minutes for a good Grizzlies team.

There are many people who perceive Carter as someone who never really cared about basketball as much as we would’ve liked him to – it seemed like he was often content to just flick his wrist on a jumper as opposed to getting to the rim. However, one argument against that perception is these reinventions that he’s undergone throughout his career and staying in good enough shape to hang with athletes half his age (here’s what Kobe Bryant had to do every day near the end of his career). It’s not as easy as it sounds – think the Knicks would be mulling a Carmelo Anthony trade if he’d adapted his game to account for his age, the team, etc.? Let’s take a closer look at how Carter has changed throughout his career.

Most millennial NBA fans remember a time when Carter was billed as the “Next Michael Jordan,” and rightfully so to some extent, even if he never fully lived up to the expectations. You remember this sh*t:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig5fN6XVq-4>

(by the way, I just tried to do some of those dunks on the Nerf hoop hanging from my bedroom door and I definitely just pulled a hammy)

His time with the Toronto Raptors and New Jersey Nets was laden with isolation scoring, much in the style of Jordan. According to Synergy’s 2004-2005 play-type stats (the earliest season in which they have such stats), 23.5% of Carter’s offensive possessions were isolation plays, the highest of any play type that season for him. The 2004-2005 season was the one in which he was traded from Toronto to New Jersey; my guess is that the isolation offense percentages were even higher during the earlier parts of his Raptors career.

As his Nets career wore on, Carter made his first adjustment, which was sprinkling pick-and-roll (PnR) a bit more into his repertoire, probably because age started to rob him of the explosiveness necessary to consistently beat defenders in isolation. Remember, Carter spent three years in college (who does that anymore?!), so he was already 32 as he finished up with the Nets. He responded by posting many of his best assist numbers (four straight seasons of at least 23.7% assist percentage, via Synergy), likely due to increased pick-and-roll ball-handling.

This new PnR-heavy Vince Carter (let’s call him Vince 2.0) was active for a few seasons. The Vince 2.0 apex was with the Orlando Magic in 2009-2010, where 39.6% of Carter’s possessions were from

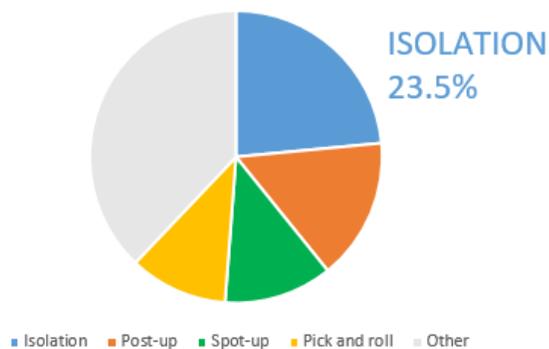
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the pick-and-roll (via Synergy), and although that number was anomalously high, the PnR percentages remained relatively healthy during his time with the Dallas Mavericks too (around 30% during his last two seasons there, the most of any play types during those seasons, via Synergy).

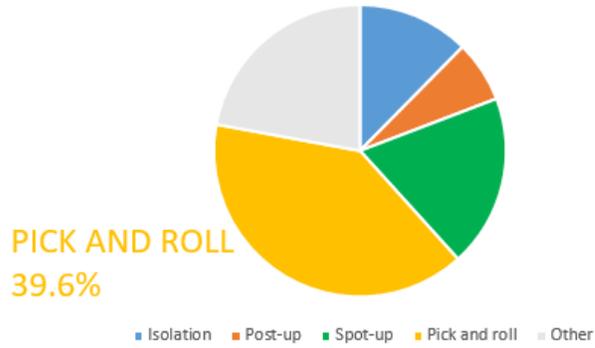
Now, Carter is in Memphis, possibly his final stop, and he has adjusted yet again to keep Father Time at bay. Vince 3.0 spends his days spotting up – 32.6% of his offensive possessions so far this season have been used that way, the most of any play type (via Synergy). And boy, can he still flick that wrist effortlessly from deep: A full 61.3% of his field-goal attempts now are from beyond the three-point line (on 6.5 attempts per 36 minutes), a sharp contrast to, say, his last full season with the Raptors (2003-2004) in which just 16.7% of his shots were from downtown (via Basketball Reference). He’s still making around 35% of his threes this year and last year with the Grizzlies, just two percentage points below his career average.

Here’s the reinvention of Vince Carter summarized through graphs from three seasons (“other” comprises a plethora of other play types that Synergy has coded for such as cuts, handoffs, transition, etc.):

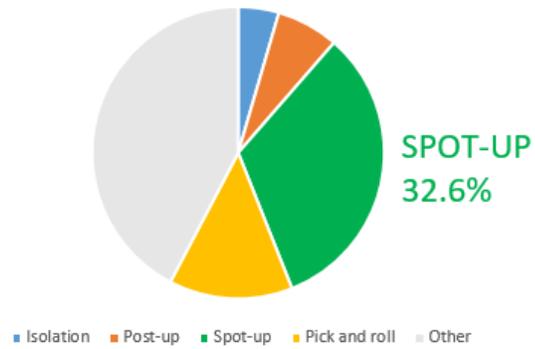
2004-2005: Vince Carter 1.0 offensive play types



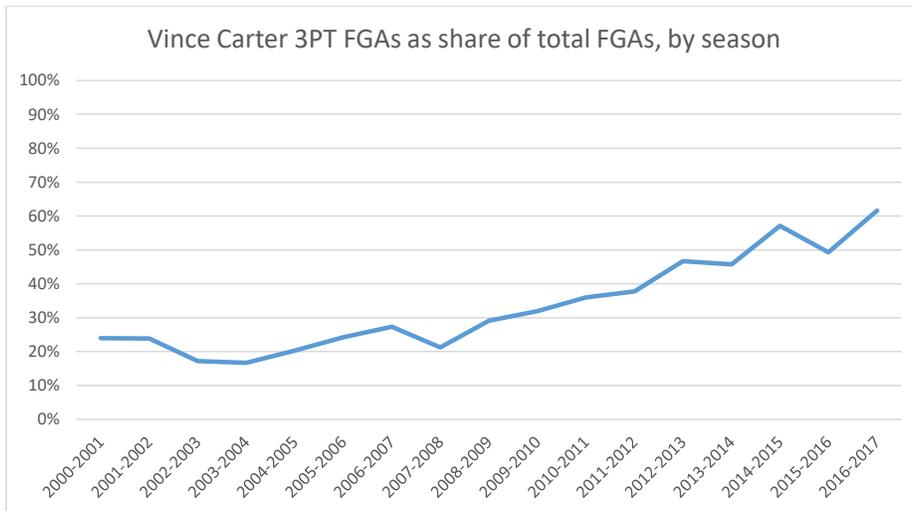
2009-2010: Vince Carter 2.0 offensive play types



2016-2017: Vince Carter 3.0 offensive play types



And here's how his shot selection has changed over the years with regards to threes:



This year, Vince 3.0 has also made a renewed commitment to defense, posting his highest Defensive Box Plus-Minus rating in the nineteenth season of his career (+0.9 points per 100 possessions, via Basketball Reference). Somehow, after definitely looking like he was too old in his first year with the Grizzlies (2014-2015), he's now modernized himself as a "3-and-D" role player who can still occasionally rev up those handlebars too:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03hV19kGW2Q>

Carter's longevity is, in part, a testament to his always thinking of the next step before he actually gets there. He started integrating the pick-and-roll a bit more with the Nets before it became his featured weapon in Orlando and Dallas, and in Phoenix and Dallas, the spot-up became a key secondary piece of his toolbox before it was unleashed fully in Memphis. He's also (seemingly) fully embraced modern analytics in shot selection, as he's almost totally excised inefficient mid-range shots from his game (8.3% of his shots this season are from between 16 feet and the 3PT line, via Basketball Reference), even though such jumpers once accounted for 37% of his shots during his 2002-2003 season with the Raptors (via Basketball Reference). He might be a step slower physically these days, but being a step ahead mentally helps a little bit.

After last year's first-round sweep at the hands of the San Antonio Spurs, Carter surprised some people by announcing that he was coming back for another season. "It still bothers me to lose games and not play well," he said after Game 4 of that series.

As long as that stuff still bothers him, you can bet that Vince Carter is going to keep re-inventing and fighting to stay relevant. That's just who he is. He's not doing it because he needs any more celebrity and fortune, and his case for the Hall of Fame is already pretty good. By almost any measure, he's on the right track.

And he's not gonna just sit there.

Commented [DC2]: <http://www.hoopsrumors.com/2016/04/grizzlies-notes-carter-conley-joerger.html>

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