Name: _____ Date: _____

Counting a Career

Reading level 13 · 1371 words

On February 7, 2023, late in the third quarter against Oklahoma City, LeBron James made a fadeaway jumper. It was his 38,388th regular-season point, one more than Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 38,387, a total that had stood since April 5, 1984. But a record is only as firm as its definition. The scoring list that crowned James counts regular-season games alone; the playoffs sit on a separate ledger. Basketball-Reference's career-points page offers three tables: NBA and ABA combined, NBA alone, and ABA alone. Wikipedia's list counts only NBA regular-season games. A reader who wants to trust a number has to ask what was counted. Behind this record sits a bigger question: how long can a body keep producing?

Here the choice happens not to matter. Through November 2, 2026, James leads the regular-season list with 43,537 points, and he also leads the playoff list with 8,521, ahead of Michael Jordan's 5,987 and Abdul-Jabbar's 5,762. Add each player's two totals and James stands at 52,058 against Abdul-Jabbar's 44,149. That margin survives each of these ways of counting, which is what makes it a safe fact. On the night of the record, the NBA stopped the game for a ceremony, and Abdul-Jabbar held the ball aloft and handed it to James. Before Abdul-Jabbar, the record belonged to Wilt Chamberlain, whose 31,419 points he passed on April 5, 1984.

Some of the numbers have shorter histories than their fame suggests. Basketball-Reference has minutes played only from the 1951-52 season, and blocks, steals and defensive rebounds only from 1973-74, so any all-time list in those categories quietly leaves out the earlier decades. Even an assist takes judgment. It is credited when a pass leads directly to a field goal, but the original definition left out a scorer who dribbled first, and comparing assist totals across eras is, in the page's words, a complex matter. Minutes are plainer: the box score for his first game, on October 29, 2003, lists 42:50 played, and by November 2, 2026, his 61,229 regular-season minutes add up to more than 42 days of play.

What does a body have to do to log those minutes? A systematic review of 25 studies, published in 2018, put numbers on it. In 40-minute matches, players covered 5 to 6 kilometers of live play at average intensities above their lactate threshold and above 85 percent of their maximal heart rate. Vigorous activity fell in the fourth quarter, and guards spent more of their live time sprinting than forwards and centers did. Forty minutes is the international length, four quarters of 10; the NBA plays 12. In Game 7 of the 2016 Finals, tied at 89 with 1:50 left, Andre Iguodala went up for a layup and James blocked it. "I had to go chase it down," he said afterward.

Before a body can be trained, it has to be available. A study of NBA ankle injuries from the

2015-16 through 2020-21 seasons, leaving out the shortened 2019-20 season, recorded 554 ankle injuries, a rate of 4.06 per 1,000 game-exposures, where one exposure is a single game appearance regardless of minutes played. Sprains and strains made up 3.71 of that rate, by far the largest share. In plain terms, that is roughly one new ankle injury for every 250 game appearances. James's own games column shows both sides of the ledger. At 33, in 2017-18, he played all 82 games. At 41, in 2025-26, he played 60. Through early November 2026, only 36 players have ever played in the NBA after turning 40.

Recovery has its own evidence, and it is thinner than the confidence around it. The best-known study is from Stanford, where 11 men's varsity basketball players tried for five to seven weeks to sleep at least ten hours in bed. They gained about 111 minutes of sleep a night. They were not in a lab: during the season they traveled for three to five days once or twice a month, by bus and plane, and on the road shared a hotel room with a teammate. Their timed sprint dropped from 16.2 seconds to 15.5, and their free throw and three-point accuracy rose by 9 and 9.2 percent. The authors note the limits: only 11 players, and no control group or crossover arm. The result is suggestive about sleep. It does not measure what any one player's routine adds to a career.

The numbers do show how James's game changed. His minutes per game fell from 42.5 in 2005-06, at 21, to 33.2 in 2025-26, at 41. His shot attempts fell from 23.1 a game to 15.3. Yet his effective field goal percentage, which counts a made three as worth one and a half twos, rose from .515 to .557. In his first game, in 2003, he took two threes and missed both. His three-point attempts later grew from 2.7 a game in 2003-04 to a peak of 8.0 in 2021-22, then fell to 4.1 in 2025-26. Fewer minutes and fewer shots, but better ones: that pattern is plain in the data. The data cannot say why it happened, whether from coaching, from the roles his teams needed, from his own choices, or from some mix of all three.

The league's structure shapes careers too. In 2003 a player could go straight from high school to the draft, and James was one of roughly 40 who ever did; since the 2006 draft, players must wait a year after their class graduates. The draft was held on June 26, 2003, in New York, and Cleveland had a 22.5 percent chance at the first pick and won the lottery. Today's lottery works with 14 numbered ping-pong balls, and its combinations are assigned to teams by the previous season's records, so a bad record raises the odds without guaranteeing anything. After the first four picks, the order simply follows those records in reverse. Rules like these decide which team first gets a young player, long before anyone asks how his body will hold up at forty.

A newer rule counts games. Since 2023-24, a player must play at least 20 minutes in each of 65 games to be eligible for MVP and All-NBA honors, with room for two shorter games and a few exceptions. It was added to the collective bargaining agreement in an attempt to curb teams from resting players for load management. After a board of governors meeting in 2026, Commissioner Adam Silver said, "I think it is working," while the players' union called for the

rule to be changed. Both sides are looking at the same games and reading them differently. James played 60 games in 2025-26, below the line of 65, and the rule counts games, not why they were missed.

Totals and rates answer different questions, and the lists show it. On Basketball-Reference's career Win Shares, an estimate of the number of wins a player contributed, James is first with 277.33, just ahead of Abdul-Jabbar's 273.41. On its career Player Efficiency Rating, a formula built by the ESPN columnist John Hollinger, the order is Nikola Jokic at 28.80, Michael Jordan at 27.91, Joel Embiid at 27.82 and James fourth at 26.65. A total rewards the player who is good for 24 seasons. A rate, such as one built per minute, rewards the player who produces the most in each minute he plays. Both are formulas with choices built into them, which is why neither one settles an argument about who is best.

Every figure here is through early November 2026 and will be out of date after the next game. What the evidence cannot yet say is how long a body can keep this up at this level. Wikipedia counts 36 players who played after their 40th birthday. The oldest, Nat Hickey, was coaching the Providence Steamrollers in 1948 when he activated himself at 45 years and 363 days old; he missed all six of his shots. Robert Parish, at 43, became the oldest player to win a championship, with the 1997 Bulls. James is 41 years and 309 days old, the oldest active player, and no one has played this many seasons. So the sleep study, the ankle counts and the minutes columns all describe a career that has not yet ended.

Questions

1. Why does the book say the scoring record is a safe fact?

A. James leads under every reasonable way of counting
B. The NBA counts only playoffs
C. Abdul-Jabbar agreed it was true

2. Which statistics does Basketball-Reference list only from 1973-74 on?

A. Minutes played
B. Blocks, steals and defensive rebounds
C. Points scored

3. What limit do the Stanford authors note about their sleep study?

A. It lasted only one night
B. It had no control group
C. It used professional players

4. In the sentence "the pattern is plain in the data," what does plain mean?

A. Simple and clear
B. Boring
C. Flat

5. Why can Win Shares and Player Efficiency Rating rank players differently?

A. One adds up production over a career and the other measures production per minute

B. One is about defense only

C. They count different seasons

6. How many players have played in the NBA after turning 40, according to the list the book cites?

A. 14

B. 36

C. 60

Words to know

threshold: tipping point
bargaining: deal talks
commissioner: league boss
efficiency: output per effort
exposures: chances to play

Answer key: Counting a Career

1. A. James leads under every reasonable way of counting
2. B. Blocks, steals and defensive rebounds
3. B. It had no control group
4. A. Simple and clear
5. A. One adds up production over a career and the other measures production per minute
6. B. 36