Name: _____ Date: _____

Counting What Never Gets Shot

Reading level 13 · 1497 words

Even a tall man's height comes with two numbers. Basketball-Reference and NBA.com list Victor Wembanyama of the San Antonio Spurs at 7 feet 4 inches, but in June 2023, a week after the draft, the Spurs announced an official height of 7 feet 3 1/2 inches, measured without shoes under NBA guidelines. His wingspan is reported as about 8 feet, though NBA.com's player page lists none and no official measurement has been published. He skipped the 2023 draft combine to stay with his French club. If a body takes this much care to measure, a defense, which is made largely of events that never happen, takes more.

Start with the one defensive event the league does count. The NBA's stat glossary defines a block as a defender tipping a shot so that the shooter cannot score, and the box score lists it beside points and rebounds. The rulebook sets its limits. Under the goaltending rule, a defender may not touch a ball that is above the rim inside the imaginary cylinder over the basket, nor one on its downward flight with a chance to score. The rim is 10 feet above the floor and 18 inches wide inside. By this book's reading, a legal block comes while the shot is still rising.

Blocks have not always been counted. The NBA says its single-game record, 17 by Elmore Smith of the Lakers on October 28, 1973, dates from the first season in which blocks were fully recorded, 1973-74. Basketball-Reference's lists reach back a little further, with Wilt Chamberlain's 446 blocks in 1972-73 and Artis Gilmore's 422 in the old ABA in 1971-72, which is one reason that comparisons across eras need care. Its lists combine the NBA and the ABA, so they span two leagues and several eras. The highest season on its list is Mark Eaton's: 456 blocks, or 5.56 a game, in 1984-85, ahead of Manute Bol's 4.96 in 1985-86 and Elmore Smith's 4.85 in 1973-74.

Set Wembanyama's seasons against that list. In 2023-24 he blocked 254 shots in 71 games, 3.58 a game, 40th on Basketball-Reference's combined list. According to ESPN, no player had ever before reached 250 blocks and 100 three-pointers in one season. In 2024-25 he averaged 3.83 over 46 games, 26th, and in 2025-26 he blocked 197 in 64 games, 3.08 a game, 89th. Reports said he led the NBA in blocks per game in each season. None of the three is in the top 20 of the all-time list, and the 2026 Defensive Player of the Year vote was unanimous anyway. Those ranks cover every season in the combined list, not only the best ones. A reader can fairly ask what the vote was counting.

One answer is that a block count depends on minutes. A per-36-minute rate scales every season to the same playing time, so a player who plays fewer minutes is not penalized. By our arithmetic, his blocks per 36 minutes were 4.3 in 2023-24 (254 in 2,106 minutes), 4.1 in

2024-25 (176 in 1,527) and 3.8 in 2025-26 (197 in 1,866). The rate drifted down while the honors went up, which is the kind of change that a season's raw totals hide. Basketball-Reference's block percentage, an estimate of the share of opponents' two-point attempts blocked while a player is on the floor, tells the same story: 10.0, 10.4, then 9.4. If blocks were the whole case, 2026 would have been his weakest year for it.

The same arithmetic tames the playoff record. On May 4, 2026, in Game 1 of the West semifinals against Minnesota, Wembanyama blocked 12 shots, an NBA playoff record. The old mark of 10 was shared by Mark Eaton, Hakeem Olajuwon and Andrew Bynum. It was the second round, and Game 1 was at home. The Spurs lost 104-102, and he made 5 of 17 shots; in the first round he had blocked 7 in a single game at Portland. Across 22 playoff games he averaged 3.5 blocks, which looks higher than the regular season's 3.1, but he also played 34.1 minutes a game instead of 29.2. Per 36 minutes, the two rates are close: about 3.7 in the playoffs and 3.8 in the regular season, by our arithmetic.

What a block cannot show is a shot that was never taken. ESPN's Baxter Holmes reported on May 24, 2026 that shots against the Spurs came from an average of 15.8 feet when Wembanyama was on the court, the greatest distance in the league. Over the whole season, the team's opponents averaged 14.9 feet. The report also found that opponents took 25.7 layup attempts per 100 possessions with him on the floor. A Western Conference analytics staffer asked in the report, "How do you measure fear?" Arena systems track 29 points on each player's body 60 times a second. That records movement, not the decision to look for another shot.

Where the rim numbers do exist, they disagree. One outlet reported, in an article dated March 24, 2026, that opponents shot 44.8 percent at the rim when he challenged them. Another, dated May 25, gave 40.7 percent as the league-leading mark for opponents at the rim, along with 9.3 contested shots a game. The reports do not say where the figures come from, how they define the rim, or why they differ. The NBA's own glossary does define a contest: a defender closing out and raising a hand before the shot is released. A figure built on that definition is a different object from a block count.

Summary metrics try to fold all of it into one figure, and every one is an estimate. Basketball-Reference gives him a box plus/minus of 10.7 for 2025-26. Its glossary defines that as a box-score estimate of the points per 100 possessions a player contributed above a league-average player. He also had a player efficiency rating of 29.9 and 5.0 defensive win shares. All three are built from the box score. They credit blocks and steals, and they cannot see the layup that was never attempted. They agree with the vote in direction, not as proof: he was also third in Most Valuable Player voting, behind Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Nikola Jokic.

So the vote is a judgment, and in 2026 it was unanimous. On April 20, 2026, he received

every first-place vote, the first time that has happened in the award's history. Chet Holmgren finished second and Ausar Thompson third, and Wembanyama, at 22, was the youngest winner. He is one of three players, with David Robinson and Michael Jordan, to win both Rookie of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year. A month earlier, in March, he told reporters, "Defense is 50% of the game and it is undervalued in the MVP race." He was also named to the All-NBA and All-Defensive first teams that year.

Skill is the other half of the story, and it is documented only in pieces. In summer 2024 he worked in San Antonio about two months before the Olympics, where France won silver, and another four or five weeks after them, as ESPN reported in October 2024. Part of that work was with former NBA guard Jamal Crawford, on ball handling and creating shots. He has also grown as a shooter: 128 three-pointers in 2023-24 at .325, then .352 and .349 in the next two seasons, and 404 career threes through November 4, 2026 on 1,197 tries, or .338. In June 2026 the Spurs reached the NBA Finals and lost to the Knicks, 4 games to 1.

The newest numbers are the least stable. Through November 4, 2026, he has played 8 games this season and is averaging 4.5 blocks, which would rank sixth on Basketball-Reference's single-season list as it stood after November 4, just above Dikembe Mutombo and David Robinson at 4.49, if it held for 82 games. That is a large "if." By our arithmetic, he has 36 blocks in those 8 games, and without the 8 he blocked against Dallas on November 4 it is 28 in 7 games, an average of 4.0. Mark Eaton's 5.56 lasted a whole season, and eight games is only about a tenth of one. Small samples bounce, and one night can move the whole average by half a block.

That Dallas game was his highest-scoring of the season so far. Wembanyama scored 52 points on 16-of-28 shooting, grabbed 24 rebounds, blocked 8 shots and made 19 of 23 free throws in 34 minutes and 4 seconds of a 112-111 Spurs win that came down to a single point. Four days earlier, on October 31, he had scored 43 against Minnesota. The win left the Spurs with 6 wins and 2 losses on the season. Everything here is dated through November 4, 2026. A new game will move the season averages, an official wingspan would settle one open question, and a better count of the shots that were never taken would settle another. The vote was unanimous. The measuring is not finished.

Questions

1. According to the book's arithmetic, why does a playoff average of 3.5 blocks look higher than the regular season's 3.1?

A. He blocked more shots per minute in the playoffs
B. He played more minutes a game in the playoffs
C. The playoffs are shorter

2. Why can a block count not measure everything a defender does?

A. Blocks are never recorded
B. A defender may block a shot only once a season
C. A shot that is never taken leaves no block to count

3. The book says the two rim percentages 'disagree.' What is the best summary of the disagreement?

A. One is 44.8 and one is 40.7, and neither explains the gap
B. Both are exactly 42 percent
C. One is from the regular season and one from the playoffs

4. In the sentence 'Summary metrics try to fold all of it into one figure, and every one is an estimate,' what does estimate mean?

A. Exact counts
B. Careful but imperfect guesses
C. Official rules

5. Why does the book call the 4.5 blocks a game in 2026-27 'a large if'?

A. Blocks are not counted in November
B. The number was copied wrongly
C. It is only 8 games, a tenth of a season

Words to know

contest: challenge a shot
estimate: informed guess
unanimous: all agreeing
wingspan: arm width
sample: small part

Answer key: Counting What Never Gets Shot

1. B. He played more minutes a game in the playoffs
2. C. A shot that is never taken leaves no block to count
3. A. One is 44.8 and one is 40.7, and neither explains the gap
4. B. Careful but imperfect guesses
5. C. It is only 8 games, a tenth of a season