Name: _____ Date: _____

Reading Kobe Bryant's Numbers

Reading level 13 · 1588 words

Kobe Bryant played 20 seasons for the Los Angeles Lakers, from 1996 to 2016, and died in January 2020, leaving one of the most thoroughly counted careers in basketball. The box score of his best-known night, January 22, 2006, shows 28 shots made out of 46, 7 of 13 three-pointers and 18 of 20 free throws, for 81 points. As of November 2026, that is the third-highest single-game total in NBA history. Only Wilt Chamberlain's 100 in 1962 and Bam Adebayo's 83 in March 2026 are higher. Numbers like these are not the whole story, but they can be checked. This book asks what they show, what they leave out and how a career is measured and remembered. Where it says "by our arithmetic," we computed a figure from published tables.

Start with the list people quote. Bryant finished with 33,643 regular-season points, third in NBA history behind Karl Malone and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. On January 25, 2020, in Philadelphia, his hometown, LeBron James passed him for third place on the all-time list, and he posted: "Continuing to move the game forward @KingJames. Much respect my brother." Basketball-Reference's list of regular-season points, updated November 4, 2026, has him fourth. Ahead of him are James with 43,537, Abdul-Jabbar with 38,387 and Malone with 36,928, and behind him is Kevin Durant, who is still playing, with 32,763. By our arithmetic, Durant needs 881 points to pass him, so a ranking is a statement about a date.

A career total rewards volume and durability. Bryant played 1,346 regular-season games and 48,637 minutes. He took 26,200 shots and made 11,719, a field-goal percentage of .447. By our arithmetic, he missed 14,481, which is less a criticism than a consequence: scoring 33,643 points at that rate takes a great many attempts. A rate statistic asks a different question. True shooting percentage, which Basketball-Reference defines as points divided by twice the sum of field-goal attempts and 0.44 times free-throw attempts, gives credit for threes and free throws. His career figure is .550. His player efficiency rating, a formula standardized so that the league average is 15, is 22.9.

Is .550 good? That depends on the year, because the league's average true shooting percentage ranged from .511 to .544 during his career. By our arithmetic, he was above the league average in 16 of his 20 seasons, among them 2005-06, when he averaged 35.4 points a game and shot .559 against the league's .536. He was level with it in 2011-12 and below it in his last three seasons, with .505, .477 and .469 against league figures of .541, .534 and .541. So the career number hides two stories. In his prime, he scored at very high volume and more efficiently than the league. In his last three seasons, which followed the injuries described below, he did not.

Whether his shots were good ones is an old argument, and the evidence is mixed. Usage percentage estimates the share of team plays a player uses while he is on the floor, and his career figure is 31.8. In 2011, Matthew Goldman and Justin Rao presented a conference paper on when in the shot clock players choose to shoot. It found that undershooting is far more common than overshooting, mostly among elite players, and it named Bryant among the stars with high undershooting scores. A blogger on ESPN's TrueHoop network who described the talk questioned the model's assumption that efficiency falls in a straight line as usage rises. In January 2020, a CBS Sports writer dismissed the "laughable new-age measurements" that call him inefficient. Neither is a verdict. One paper is not settled science, and a column is an opinion.

Championships are team numbers. Bryant won five, in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2009 and 2010, along with two Finals MVP awards and one regular-season MVP award. The first three came in the triangle offense that coach Phil Jackson ran with assistant Tex Winter. In 2012, the writer Chuck Klosterman argued that the system did not explain those titles. He wrote that it was central to how the teams worked. Bryant said of Winter, as Sports Illustrated quoted him, "Tex taught me how to study every detail." A box score cannot record that, or what Jerry Colangelo told the New York Times in 2020: at the 2008 Olympic camp, he was the first player to arrive and was working out at 5:30 in the morning. That is one man's recollection, not a record.

Skill is harder to measure than to describe, and footwork is one documented example. Hakeem Olajuwon, the Hall of Fame center, worked with Bryant in 2009. Olajuwon described his method this way: "You start with a mental picture, then it is all footwork," and he added, "And the footwork is repetition." Sports Illustrated reported in 2011 that even Bryant needed a full-day tutorial. It added that his post efficiency did not rise afterward, although he had been moving his shots gradually closer to the basket. Olajuwon later said that of all the players he had worked with, the one who "really capitalized on it the most" was Kobe Bryant. The two accounts do not contradict each other. One measures a number, and the other describes a movement the number may miss.

Bryant's 2012-13 season ended on April 12, 2013. That season, at 34, he had averaged more than 38 minutes a game, more than any teammate and more than any player over 30 in the league, according to the Associated Press. Two nights earlier, he had played all 48 minutes in Portland and scored 47 points. Late in the game against Golden State, driving past Harrison Barnes, he fell. He stayed in to shoot two free throws, made both and then went to the locker room. He had played 44 minutes 54 seconds and scored 34 points, and the Lakers won, 118 to 116. Later he said he had been "trying to feel if the tendon is there or if it's gone."

The Achilles tendon is the largest tendon in the body. It joins the calf muscles to the heel bone, and a complete tear typically happens when the calf is stretched too quickly, as in landing from a jump or cutting in a sport. Evidence on what follows is limited. A 2013 study in

the American Journal of Sports Medicine followed 18 NBA players whose complete Achilles ruptures were repaired between 1988 and 2011. Seven never played another NBA game. Among the 11 who returned, player efficiency rating fell by 4.57 in the first season, and the decline was significant compared with matched controls. No source here says why his tendon tore, and one injury cannot be traced to one cause. His games played in his last three seasons were 6, 35 and 66.

Bryant's last game, on April 13, 2016, against Utah in Los Angeles, ended with 60 points on 50 shots, 22 of which went in. The Lakers won, 101 to 96. By Basketball-Reference's formula, his true shooting percentage that night was .543, about equal to the league's .541 that season: average efficiency, at a volume of 50 shots. The game is remembered as a farewell, and it can also be read as a shooting line, and neither reading cancels the other. In November 2015, he had announced in a letter called "Dear Basketball" that the season would be his last. "This season is all I have left to give," he wrote. He was 37.

On January 26, 2020, Bryant died in a helicopter crash in Calabasas, California, with his daughter and seven others, nine people in all. The National Transportation Safety Board found in February 2021 that the pilot's decision to continue flying into cloud caused spatial disorientation and loss of control, and that the pilot's likely self-induced pressure and the operator's safety oversight contributed. In February 2020, the NBA renamed its All-Star Game MVP award the Kobe Bryant MVP Award. He had won it four times. Later that year, he was elected to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, in a class with Tim Duncan, Kevin Garnett and Tamika Catchings.

A full account also includes the 2003 Colorado case. The Associated Press and NPR reported its course in 2004 and 2005. In 2003 Bryant was charged with felony sexual assault; prosecutors dropped the case in September 2004 after the woman said she could not take part in a trial; his statement said he believed the encounter was consensual, recognized she did not view it as he did, and apologized for his behavior that night; her civil suit was settled in March 2005, terms not released. The case did not go to trial, so there was no verdict. Those are the points the records support, and this book adds nothing to them.

Every figure here is through early November 2026, and the first to change could be the ranking: by our arithmetic, Kevin Durant needs 881 points to pass him for fourth. His rates and injury data will not move, because the career they describe is over. Rankings can, as the 81-point game did in March 2026 when Bam Adebayo scored 83. In 2017, the Lakers raised both of his jerseys to the arena's rafters at halftime of a game against Golden State. The Warriors skipped their usual halftime routine to watch. What cannot be counted is how a sport chooses to remember a person. On the day he died, many NBA teams began their games with a 24-second violation on purpose, and some took eight-second ones, for the two numbers he wore.

Questions

1. Why does the book say a ranking is "a statement about a date"?

A. Lists never change
B. Another active player could pass Bryant and change the order
C. Bryant's total is disputed

2. By the book's arithmetic, how did Bryant's true shooting percentage compare with the league's?

A. Below it in every season
B. Exactly equal each year
C. Above it in 16 of 20 seasons and below it in his last three

3. What did the 2011 Goldman and Rao paper find about shooting too little?

A. It is far more common than shooting too much
B. It never happens
C. It happens only to rookies

4. In the sentence "Evidence on what follows is limited," what does limited mean?

A. Completely settled
B. Free to anyone
C. Not very much

5. What did the 2013 study find about the 18 NBA players with repaired Achilles ruptures?

A. All returned to play for years
B. Seven never played another NBA game
C. None had surgery

6. Why does the book call Colangelo's account "one man's recollection"?

A. It is his memory told to a newspaper, not a record
B. It was never published
C. He made it up

Words to know

efficiency: output per effort
volume: sheer amount
undershooting: shooting too little
rupture: complete tear
recollection: one's memory

Answer key: Reading Kobe Bryant's Numbers

1. B. Another active player could pass Bryant and change the order
2. C. Above it in 16 of 20 seasons and below it in his last three
3. A. It is far more common than shooting too much
4. C. Not very much
5. B. Seven never played another NBA game
6. A. It is his memory told to a newspaper, not a record