

Jerry Krause, NABC Research Chair

The Impact of Kenny Sailors' Jump Shot on the History of Basketball

Research Evidence on the Development of Modern Jump Shot

“The jump shot was the most important skill development in the history of basketball. It was, along with several rule changes, a historical milestone in basketball history.”

— Jerry Krause, NABC Research Chair (1970-present)

The modern basketball jump shot began as a response to a need for a midrange scoring tool. Originally the close in layup was commonly used, especially with the advent of the backboard. The first long range shot was an adaptation of early two-handed passing technique as the two-handed set shot. The new midrange jump shot also sped up the game along with elimination of the center jump. Later, the midrange jump shot evolved into the “all range” shot facing the basket. This was enhanced with the recent rule change creating the three point field goal.

Like many sport innovations, significant skill developments are often created by players, not coaches who tend to resist changes due to tradition. This critical skill change in basketball, the jump shot, was created and developed primarily by players.

The foremost of these players who I believe developed the essential elements of the modern jump shot was Kenny Sailors of Wyoming.

As a small, young player in the family where he grew up, Kenny responded to a need to be able to shoot over his much larger, older brother Bud. So he jumped up from two feet and shot his first jump shot in 1934 at age 13. Sailors' personality played a major role in the development of the jump shot. Growing up in the depression, he became creative and doggedly persistent. His problem solving creativity allowed him to find a way to compete successfully against a much larger defender/goal tender in his older brother. His perseverance propelled him to develop the newly discovered scoring innovation in the face of stubborn resistance from unknowing and change resistant coaches over his whole playing career (high school, college and professional). Today, the modern jump shot is the primary scoring weapon at all levels of basketball from all ranges.

My extensive research has convinced me that Kenny Sailors creatively and persistently over a long period of time (1934-on) did indeed develop the essential elements of today's basketball jump shot. These elements are:

1. Jumping from a two-foot quick/jump stop that “squared” the body to the basket. This allows players to shoot facing the basket anywhere on the court, while elevating over the defense by translating horizontal motion into vertical motion. The two-foot jump produces quickness and balance for the shot. This also produces sufficient vertical leg momentum to shoot the ball deep in the basket from long distances. Sailors first used the two foot takeoff to shoot the jump shot but took over four years to control forward momentum to produce the vertical motion of today's shot. Sailors was documented to have a 36 inch jump and reach, an amazing physical ability at that time.
2. Shooting a one hand shot on the side of the body. This allows a vertical plane alignment of the foot, leg, arm and ball to enable the player to align the shooting elements of the body and ball in a vertical plane that doesn't obstruct vision for the shot and produces a straight shot with a high degree of accuracy deep in the basket.
3. Other players developed and experimented with variations of the jump shot – the running one hand “step & shoot” version, the two foot/two hand overhead style, the one hand inside fade-away shot, and variations of rotating corkscrew jumping shots. In fact, almost any shot taken while jumping from one foot was characterized as a jump shot at that time. This researcher has not found clear visual (photo or film) evidence earlier than 1934 of the modern jump shot other than that of Kenny Sailors. In addition, Kenny Sailors never used the two hand set shot, only the one-hander, which was a major factor in his successful development of the modern jump shot.

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