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Kemba Walker – Scouting Report & Statistical/Contractual Analysis

Kemba Walker has been one of the more intriguing players in the Eastern Conference over the past several seasons, showing promising signs of improvement and making his first NBA All-Star game in 2017. Walker is the surefire leader of the Charlotte Hornets, and his impending free agency in the summer of 2019 will certainly be amongst the front office's priorities over the next two seasons and off-seasons. I have performed a series of analyses over Kemba Walker's game, and have provided my perspective as to how Charlotte should approach Walker's upcoming contract negotiations, relative to his performance, age, future outlook, etc. Please see below for a Synergy scouting report, supplemental statistical breakdown, and contract negotiation strategy.



Synergy Scouting Report – Kemba Walker

Offensive Strengths

Flare Screens – Walker is in the 100th percentile, literally the best in the NBA, with regard to points-per-possession (PPP) coming off of flare screens coming off to his right. Walker averaged 1.548 PPP on a blistering 73.8% effective field goal percentage (eFG%). After delving into the film, it is apparent that the Hornets frequently run this as an initiation of their half-court offense, but it often produces a high quality look right off the bat. Walker does an excellent job of sprinting toward the paint, acting like he's going to cut through the lane via UCLA cut action, and coaxing his defender into going to the inside of the flare-screener. At this point, Walker plants hard, stopping on a dime and stepping back to the three-point line at the exact right angle to ensure his defender gets caught up in the flare screen. This results in a plethora of wide-open looks, as the opposing big that was originally matched up with the flare-screener is usually unable to react quickly enough to help on the close-out. It is additionally noted that Cody Zeller was the screener on the majority of these possessions, and he does a superb job of slightly repositioning himself (without being called for a moving screen) simultaneously with Walker's jab and retreat to the three-point line.

Stationary Hand-Offs – Walker is in the 98th percentile with regard to PPP following stationary hand-offs. This action is successful, in part, due to the chemistry that Walker has developed with Zeller. Zeller often peels up to the high post when a possession starts to get sloppy, serving as an outlet to Walker.

Walker consistently approaches the hand-off action very close to Zeller, functionally acting as a screen and resulting in a quick switch. Walker's offensive versatility in these post-handoff switch scenarios usually results in him having his way with a slow, opposing big. Sometimes Walker simply carries his momentum coming off of the hand-off straight at the big, resulting in a crafty finish and/or a foul. Walker often offers up a quick stutter and acts as if he will pull up, then proceeds to blow by the big with his lightning quickness for an easy lay-in. If the big shades back into the paint after the hand-off out of fear of being blown by, Walker has become a much more efficient jump-shooting threat this year, with the ability to knock down the mid-range pull-up or step back for a three-pointer.

Offensive Weaknesses

Isolation Drives – Although perceived as an isolation wizard (primarily based off of obliterating Gary McGhee's ankles on a last-second step-back in the Big East Quarterfinals against Pitt), Walker struggles in isolation situations in the NBA. The majority of Walker's efficient offensive arsenal comes off of a lot of the action noted in the 'Offensive Strengths' section above. Walker ranks in the 34th percentile overall in isolations, and particularly struggles on isolation-initiated drives (which make up the majority of his isolation possessions). Walker ranks in only the 25th percentile on isolation drives, with only 0.75PPP and an eFG% of only 33.3%. This weakness is primarily due to Walker's lack of size (as you will see below, is also the root cause of some of his defensive flaws), and results in an array of contorted, flailing, forced layup attempts and low-percentage runners/floater.

Defensive Strengths

Post-Up Defense – An area that Walker surprisingly excels at given his lack of size is in post-up defense. Walker allows only 0.738 PPP on a 37.1% eFG%. Although the sample size is not particularly large, the opposition sometimes targets Walker in the post due to his lack of size and length. Walker exhibits an excellent balance of tenacity, focus, and discipline in these situations, often forcing the opposition to catch the initial post-feed higher out than the opposition would prefer. It seems as if Walker's matchup tends to believe that they have to put a shot up since they have a perceived mismatch in the post, and Walker does a great job of staying in good position and forcing tougher than anticipated looks.

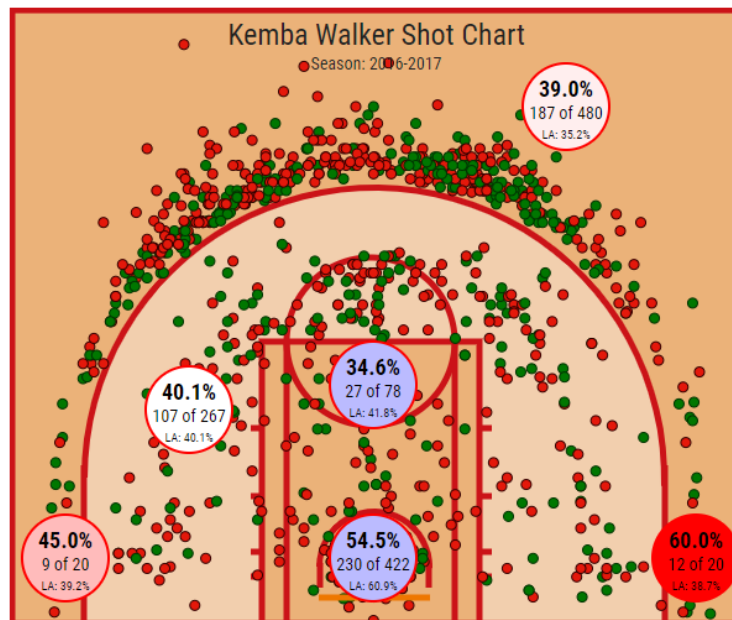
Defensive Weaknesses

Defensively Navigating Off of Screens – Walker tends to struggle defensively when chasing his matchup around screens. He gives up 1.204 PPP, which is only in the 14th percentile in the NBA. The Synergy film indicates that Walker's struggles in this area come from a multitude of weaknesses. Firstly, Walker is a relatively small guard, which makes it difficult for him to fight through screens set by much larger opposing bigs. This lack of size, supplemented by a pedestrian wingspan, makes it difficult for Walker to effectively close out on a shooter even if he successfully navigates his way through the screen. Walker could benefit from recognizing the impending screen earlier, effectively communicating with his teammate whose man is setting the screen, and recognizing the angles and positioning that can help get through/around the screen without getting bumped or pinned.

Late Shot Clock / Clutch Defense – With less than 4 seconds left on the shot clock, the offensive team is usually left with an inefficient, low quality look. With Walker as the primary defender in these situations, however, opposing offenses are averaging 0.977 PPP on a 50.9% eFG%, which puts Walker in only the 15th percentile in the NBA, well below average. Walker's difficulty in these situations is, once again, attributable to his lack of size and length. He rarely gets simply blown by, but rather struggles to get a high enough hand on a pull-up jumper from much longer players in late-clock isolation scenarios. Walker also struggles, as noted above, fighting through ball screens late in the shot clock, resulting in above average looks for the opposition with the shot clock winding down.

Supplemental Statistical Breakdown

- Box Score Statistics
 - 23.2 PPG (Career High), 17th in the NBA.
 - 5.5 APG
 - 3.9 RPG
 - 1.1 SPG
 - 34.7 MPG
- Offensive Focal Point
 - 75.5 passes received per game, 3rd in the NBA behind J. Harden, I. Thomas
 - 5.4 average seconds per touch, 2nd in the NBA behind J. Wall
 - 88.1 touches per game, 5th in the NBA behind R. Westbrook, J. Harden, L. James, J. Wall
 - 29.2% USG%
- Three-Point Shooting
 - 3.0 three-pointers made per game (Career High), 7th in the NBA
 - 7.6 three-pointers attempted per game (Career High), 8th in the NBA
 - 39.9% 3P% (Career High), one of only five NBA players to shoot >38.0% on >500 total attempts



*Per nbasavant.com

Contract Negotiation

- Remainder of Current Contract: 2 Years, \$24M (2017-18 \$12M, 2018-19 \$12M)
 - 93rd highest paid player in the NBA
 - 37th highest paid guard in the NBA
 - 6th highest paid player on the Charlotte Hornets

Walker is one of the better bargain contracts in the NBA, as the Hornets wisely inked him to a 4-year, \$48M extension in the fall of 2014. Post TV deal cap spike, this contract is about as team friendly as you will find in the league. Not that Kemba Walker is Stephen Curry, but the contract reminds me of the team-friendly deal that Curry agreed to amidst his ankle injury concerns. That

being said, I would expect Walker and his agent, Jeff Schwartz, to use his outperformance of his current deal as a negotiating tactic in his upcoming contract negotiation. Walker's uptick in 3-point attempts, percentage, and corresponding efficiency over the past two seasons certainly play in his favor in seeking a large contract. His durability also serves as a positive negotiating chip, in that he has only missed four games over the past two seasons.

The foundation of this negotiation will be driven upon the movement in salary cap over the next two seasons, as the recent underperformance against forecasted BRI really dried up the 2017 free agency market. If Golden State, for example, continues to buzz through the playoffs and only play 17-19 playoff games as opposed to 24-25, that will continue to drive down BRI and, in turn, the money available to free agents in the coming off-seasons. Ultimately, I feel that Kemba Walker is a step above the likes of George Hill and Jeff Teague as a player, and will enter free agency at a slightly younger age, while being less accomplished than Kyle Lowry did this offseason. Walker will likely fare better than Hill and Teague, and could wind up with a contract relatively comparable to that of Lowry in the summer of 2019.

From a Charlotte Hornets extension / re-signing perspective, their cap sheet is currently as follows:

Player		Salary					Signed Using	Guaranteed
		2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22 2022-23		
Dwight Howard	31	\$23,500,000	\$23,819,725				Cap Space	\$47,319,725
Nicolas Batum	28	\$22,434,783	\$24,000,000	\$25,565,217	\$27,130,434		Cap Space	\$72,000,000
Marvin Williams	31	\$13,168,750	\$14,087,500	\$15,006,250			Cap Space	\$27,256,250
Michael Kidd-Gilchrist	23	\$13,000,000	\$13,000,000	\$13,000,000			1st Round Pick	\$26,000,000
Cody Zeller	24	\$12,584,270	\$13,528,090	\$14,471,910	\$15,415,730		1st Round Pick	\$56,000,000
Kemba Walker	27	\$12,000,000	\$12,000,000				1st Round Pick	\$24,000,000
Jeremy Lamb	25	\$7,000,000	\$7,488,372				Rookie scale extension	\$14,488,372
Malik Monk	19	\$2,904,480	\$3,447,480	\$4,028,400	\$5,345,687		1st Round Pick	\$6,351,960
Frank Kaminsky	24	\$2,847,600	\$3,627,842				1st round pick	\$2,847,600
Michael Carter-Williams	25	\$2,700,000					Bi-annual Exception	\$2,700,000
Johnny O'Bryant	24	\$1,524,305					Minimum Salary	\$1,524,305
Trevon Graham	23	\$1,312,611					Minimum Salary	
Dwayne Bacon	21	\$815,615	\$1,378,242	\$1,618,520			MLE	\$2,193,857
Team Totals		\$115,792,414	\$116,377,251	\$73,690,297	\$47,891,851			\$282,682,069

*Per Basketball-Reference.com

Color Key: Free Agent, Player, Team, or Early Termination

The Hornets' recent offseason acquisition, Dwight Howard, will fortunately have his nearly \$24M cap hit come off of the books at the same time as Walker's impending free agency. The Hornets will also be freed up of Jeremy Lamb's ~\$7.5M hit. It will be interesting to see how Marvin Williams and Michael Kidd-Gilchrist approach their player options. Williams, who will be 33 years old when his option decision arises, seems likely to exercise the option, unless he'd be more comfortable with testing the free agency market in hopes of taking home a greater amount of money, in the aggregate, spread over several years. Kidd-Gilchrist will also be an interesting case study, given the fact that he will still be only 25 years old when his option decision arises, and his defensive versatility is highly valued in today's NBA.

When it's all said and done, I would expect the Hornets to prioritize re-signing Kemba Walker. His outside shooting volume and consistency over the past couple of seasons, in conjunction with his ~85% free throw percentage, are indicators that Walker will continue to thrive in his late 20's to early 30's. It is also reassuring to know that the Hornets have Cody Zeller, the big that initiates many of Walker's best looks through the various screen and hand-off scenarios noted above, locked up through 2020-2021. With consideration given to all of the factors above, I would, as

Charlotte Hornets General Manager, Rich Cho, offer Walker a contract in the realm of 3-years, ~\$85-90M (subject to change, per new information collected over the next two years). This would slot Walker well above the George Hill and Jeff Teague contracts signed this summer for 3-years, \$57M, and a slight notch below that of Kyle Lowry, who accepted a 3-year, \$100M contract to stay in Toronto. The 3-year time frame is consistent with those contracts noted above, as well as Paul Millsap, and numerous other free agents that recently inked deals in their late 20's. This contract would likely provide value to the Hornets over Walker's tail end of his prime and initiation of his post-prime, all without taking on the highly likely, unnecessary backside risk of an undersized, mid-30's point guard drop-off.