

PLAYBOOK



NBA

OLD GUARD, NEW TRICKS

HOW THE MAVERICKS FINALLY FIGURED OUT WHAT THE HECK TO DO WITH MONTA ELLIS.

By Jordan Brenner

Keith Smart needed a new angle. It was 2008 or 2009, and the then-Warriors assistant coach was ensconced as Monta Ellis' mentor, a role he'd embraced when the mercurial guard joined the team in 2005 straight from high school in Mississippi. Now, as Smart searched for a way to reach the wildly inconsistent Ellis, he peppered him with questions about life away from basketball. Eventually, Ellis mentioned a lake where he'd spend hours in the offseason, rod in hand, mind at rest. "It's heaven," Ellis said. "I don't think about anything. It's just a place for me to be." Ellis was talking fishing. But Smart heard something deeper. "When you



THE ANALYTICS ISSUE

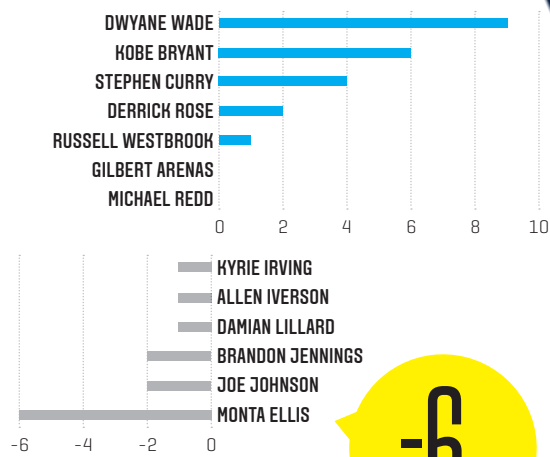
get frustrated," he told Ellis, "I'm just going to say to you, 'Monta, get to your spot. Get to your spot.'" For most of his career, that hardly seemed possible. In a sport increasingly obsessed with efficiency, Ellis became the antonym—scoring as many as 25.5 ppg but needing the most shots in the NBA to do so. With the Bucks last season, he shot worse (41.6%) than any other player who took at least 17 shots a game. Then last July he landed in Dallas, and an odd thing happened. He got better. Here's the true story of how his nine-year career came untracked and how he finally found his sanctuary.



1 HE HAD A GUN. HE WASN'T AFRAID TO USE IT

Before signing Ellis this offseason, the Mavs had many reasons to doubt he could play a winning brand of ball. Although he made his mark in Golden State with a relentless, attacking style, shooting 53.1% in 2007-08, in the years since, his shot attempts became more frequent and less efficient. By last season, he had become the poster child for awful basketball.

NET RATING FOR HIGH-VOLUME SHOOTERS*

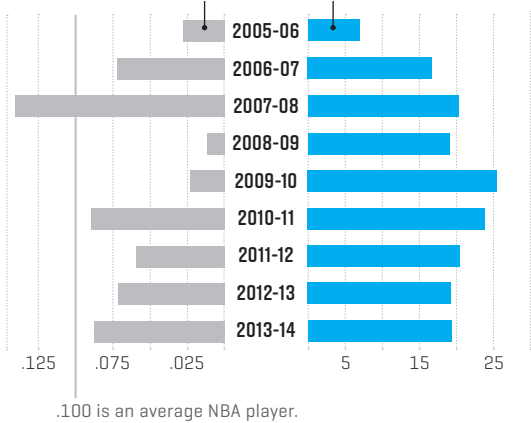


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2 IF BY "ALL," YOU INCLUDE RAGING NARCISSISM ...

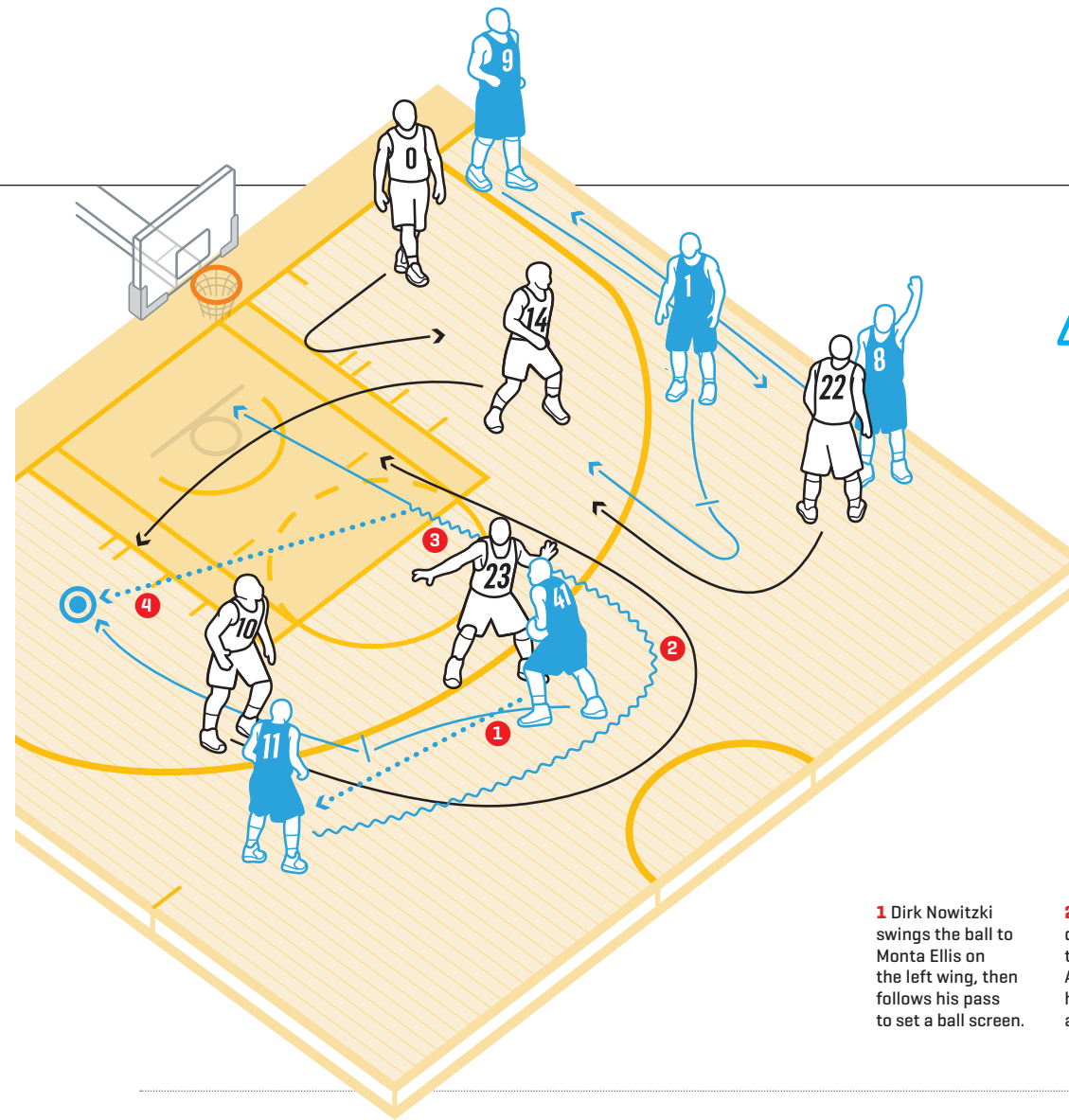
In 2007-08, he scored 51.8% of his points in the paint; by 2011-12, that number was down to 37.6%, as he relied increasingly on a faulty three-point stroke and midrange jumpers. He was even worse on D. And his self-awareness appeared nonexistent: In an interview last year, Ellis famously compared himself to Dwyane Wade, declaring, "Monta Ellis have it all."

WIN SHARES/48 VS. PPG (ELLIS)



3 THE MAVS SIGNED MONTA ELLIS? YOU MEAN THE MONTA ELLIS ...?!

That style wouldn't seem to mix with the Mavs. Under owner Mark Cuban, Dallas has invested heavily in analytics, hiring 82games.com founder Roland Beech to work as a consultant and in its front office. When Ellis signed a three-year, \$25.1 million deal with the Mavs—far less than he'd hoped to land on the open market—their marriage appeared odd and even desperate: After failing to make the playoffs, the Mavs were buying a lottery ticket.



4 IT'S SO SIMPLE, IT JUST MIGHT WORK!

How strange it is, then, to see Ellis in Dallas these days exuding an air of patience and control. Just three months into his Mavericks tenure, he's averaging 19.2 ppg. His shot attempts are down to 15.4 a night, and his field goal percentage (.463) is his highest in six years. Most important, he has the Mavs contending in the loaded West; after missing the playoffs last season, they were 32-22 at the All-Star break and perhaps one player away from challenging the conference's elite. The change in Ellis is evident in the most ordinary plays of the most ordinary games, like a January tilt against the Pelicans. This play [left] is simple and effective—two words rarely used to describe Ellis' game.

ON THE FLOOR

MAVERICKS	PELICANS
PG - Jose Calderon #8	PG - Brian Roberts #22
SG - Monta Ellis #11	SG - Eric Gordon #10
SF - Jae Crowder #9	SF - Al-Farouq Aminu #0
PF - Dirk Nowitzki #41	PF - Anthony Davis #23
C - Samuel Dalembert #1	C - Jason Smith #14

- SCREEN
- PASS
- MOVE
- DRIBBLE

- 1** Dirk Nowitzki swings the ball to Monta Ellis on the left wing, then follows his pass to set a ball screen.
- 2** Ellis takes a hard dribble to his right and turns the corner on Anthony Davis, who has hedged aggressively away from Nowitzki.
- 3** Here, as Ellis speeds toward the foul line, the difference between Ellis today and the Ellis of old is revealed, when ...
- 4** ... as Jason Smith steps over to help, Ellis shovels a one-handed pass to a wide-open Nowitzki, who hoists a 15-footer. That's German for swish.

5 EVERYTHING'S BETTER WITH DIRK

The way the brain trust of the Mavericks sees it, Ellis had gotten a bad rap. "He got bashed a bit by what I call simple analytics," Beech says. "I'm not a big fan of these one-number ratings. They're not really getting the whole story." For coach Rick Carlisle, the equation was simpler still. "If you know a guy is better than what you have, f— the analytics," he says. "Really. Screw 'em."

Of course, what Carlisle and Beech actually know is that they employ a secret efficiency weapon. Dr. as Beech says, "The Dirk Effect is real." Unlike most bigs, after Dirk screens opposing guards, he pops almost directly back, making it difficult for a weakside defender to rotate over to contest his shot, should the guard pitch the ball back. If defenders switch, Dirk can punish the smaller guard in the post. And if the man guarding the ballhandler goes under the pick, Carlisle says, "It's a race to the rim." And Ellis will always win that race.

TEAM	PPG ON PLAYER DRIVES
NUGGETS TY LAWSON	13.1
MAVERICKS MONTA ELLIS	12.2
SPURS TONY PARKER	12.1
HAWKS JEFF TEAGUE	10.8
SUNS GORAN DRAGIC	10.5
PELICANS TYREKE EVANS	10.4
KINGS ISAIAH THOMAS	10.2
76ERS MICHAEL CARTER-WILLIAMS	10.0
PELICANS JRUE HOLIDAY	9.4
GRIZZLIES MIKE CONLEY	9.1



*PLAYERS WHO HAVE AVERAGED MORE THAN 15 SHOTS PER GAME SINCE 2005-06.

CHANGING THE GAME

AT HOME PLATE

CHANGE TOOK THE FIELD IN THE MID-1970s.

Change like the designated hitter. For decades, baseball fans averted their eyes when pitchers strolled to the plate, took a few wild hacks and sat back down before assuming their rightful place back on the mound. Starting in 1973, leagues began to mercifully adopt the DH role, allowing hitters and pitchers to simply do what they do best.

Imagine a world with only heavy beer and .213 batting averages. Thanks to Miller Lite and the DH, we don't have to.

IT'S *Miller* TIME.

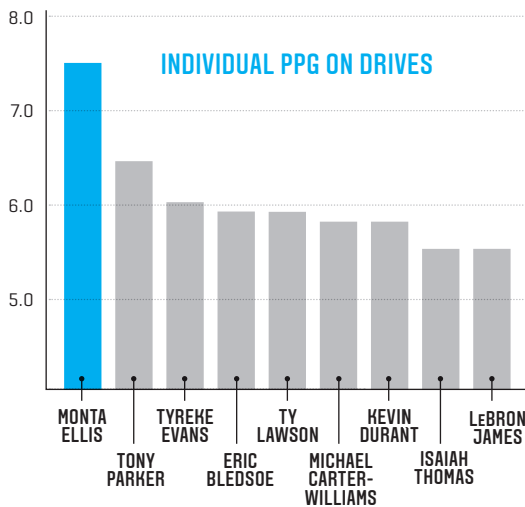


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GREAT RESPONSIBILITY
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6 HE DRIVES. HE SHOOTS. HE SCORES

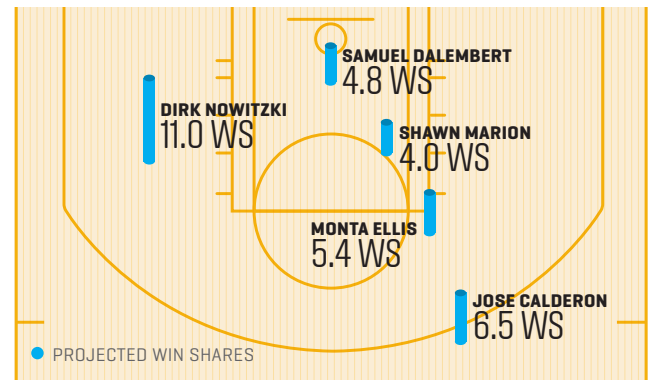
An Ellis drive is basketball's closest approximation to a running back surging for the goal line. He doesn't so much penetrate as hurl himself, full speed, toward the rim. And he does it more than any other player in the league. The NBA's SportVU player tracking system shows that Ellis' 51.5 drives leads the league, as does his 7.5 ppg on those plays.



IN SPACE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM

For proof of the efficacy of the Mavs D, consider the spacing of the sweet spots of their starting players. Look, Ma—no overlap!

With Dirk's nifty one-legged J stretching the D, Ellis has room to roam. Speaking of Dirk: 11 projected WS for a 35-year-old? Impressive.



STARTERS' SWEET SPOTS The spot at which each player shoots most above league average with above-average frequency, per NBA.com/stats.

7 "MONTA, GET TO YOUR SPOT"

But all these stats don't tell the full story. In Milwaukee, Ellis played with another ball-dominant guard in Brandon Jennings on a team that lacked bigs who could shoot; it's little surprise his efficiency waned. But Dallas is fundamentally different. Last summer, before the Mavs signed Ellis, they added Jose Calderon, a pass-first point guard and one of the league's top three-point shooters. Unlike Ellis' previous backcourt mates, Calderon is content to let Ellis function as the primary playmaker. And with the Spaniard spotting up on the weak side, along with shooters like Vince Carter, Shawn Marion and Jae Crowder, Ellis has space to operate,

letting his previously hidden skills shine.

"I knew he could score with the best of them," Nowitzki says. "But his ability to make plays for others is what has really set him apart so far." Says Ellis: "In Golden State, Coach Smart showed me a stat where if I didn't take 20 shots in a game, we weren't going to win. Here, I don't have to shoot like that. All I have to do is play basketball, open my vision and make the right play."

There is an ease to Ellis' voice as he delivers that message, beyond his Mississippi drawl. As Smart, his former coach, says, "Monta is at peace." As a piece that finally fits.

ALL STATS THROUGH FEB. 11.

TONY GUTIERREZ/AP IMAGES