



THE BASKETBALL SCOUT'S CHEAT SHEET

THE 4 PILLARS OF EFFECTIVE SCOUTING

JAMES KERTI

What separates good basketball scouts from mediocre ones?

How big of a difference in the scouting process is there between finding the next superstar and the next super bust?

How do you maximize your chances of finding Manu instead of Darko?

It comes down to understanding four key principles about scouting, what I call the **Four Pillars of Effective Scouting**.

By keeping them in mind while you build scouting experience, you can shave years off your learning curve while avoiding devastating mistakes and getting better results in the meantime.

Who this book is for

I'm writing this book not only for people who want to scout professionally, but also for those fans who simply want to understand and enjoy the game and talk about it with their friends in a new, deeper way.

Unless you've spent a ton of time inside the industry, a lot of what you know about basketball probably comes from the media.

And while the media may tell a good story, they don't always get that story right.

This book is to help you discover the story for yourself, through your own eyes and ears.

Who this book isn't for

If you're not comfortable having your views and opinions about basketball challenged, this book probably isn't for you.

Clinging to your basketball beliefs as if they are dogma will leave you stuck.

Furthermore, if you're turned off by the thought of practicing your skills, this book isn't for you either.

You can't scout well without embracing practice. If you insist on proceeding as if you know everything at the beginning, you will not succeed, and reading this book will be a waste of your time.

How to use this book

“Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.”

—John Wooden

I’m not writing this book because I’ve discovered a silver bullet for perfect scouting.

There’s no such thing.

I have my own process. Other scouts have theirs, and you’ll have yours.

I’m not going to hand you my process and assure you it will work as well for you as it does for me. It doesn’t work that way.

What I will say is if you choose to create your own process, while keeping these principles in mind and putting in the work, you’ll come out ahead.

I wrote this book as a guide so you can:

1.) Figure out how to get started (if you haven’t already).

There’s a tendency to think that there’s some huge barrier to entry to scouting a player or a scouting a game, an idea that you need to be a super genius to do so and that you need someone’s permission.

You don’t need an NBA general manager to hire you before you can scout a game for yourself.

You don’t need anyone’s permission to take the first steps.

I mean it.

I didn’t have anybody’s endorsement when I started going to high school basketball games and taking notes.

It was scary as hell at first. I had picked up some basic advice from a scout I met before, but I didn’t really know what I was doing.

But I took those first steps, and I kept walking, and things started to make sense. And it became a lot less scary.

So if you want to get started and you feel afraid, I promise you, I understand. I’ve been there.

I'm going to show you how to get started—what to do, and what not to do.

2.) Develop your own scouting process, put it to work, and hone it along the way.

These Pillars are universal; they apply whether you're scouting your first game or your thousandth.

Looking back on when I first began scouting, I can see how these Pillars made a big difference for me. And I see how they're just as important to me now, years later.

By keeping them in mind on your scouting journey, you'll develop an effective scouting process that works for you.

Who I am

I'm a basketball scout and consultant. I've helped college basketball teams with player evaluation and recruiting, and NBA teams with the NBA Draft over the last few years.

But here's the thing. I'm not a former high-level basketball player or coach. I don't have that type of basketball background to draw upon.

I actually have a background in software engineering, marketing, web design, entrepreneurship, and a host of other things.

I had been an obsessive basketball fan for many years. When I was growing up near Philadelphia, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson were legends to me, and Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen were epic heroes of flesh and blood. I always knew I wanted to be involved in sports, but being short and not naturally athletic, I didn't know then how that dream would come to be.



I've spent a lot of time around various levels of basketball over the last decade, figuring out how things work and how I could contribute with the skills and experience I do have. I've met people who have followed similar paths, and I've noticed patterns.

I know from my own and others' experiences that you can be an effective scout without having a deep high-level basketball background. You can grow your own scouting

practice while learning from others and using your own skills and experiences to your advantage.

I remember when, at one of the first tournaments I attended, a perennial Final Four coach I met the previous night spotted me from across the gym and came running over to pick my brain. It was an incredible feeling, and I know you can get to that place without having high-level basketball experience, and you can get there a lot more quickly than you think.

If your experience includes high-level basketball—great! It helps. If not, you have your own experience you can build from.

Whether your background is similar to mine, or if you are a tenured player or coach, I believe this book will help you.

Why I'm writing this book

For too long, there have been no resources to help people learn how to watch games like a scout and break away from the traditional narratives spread by the media.

This world needs obsessive basketball fans and prospective scouts to be empowered and to have the tools to succeed.

You're the right person to read this book and I'm the right person to write it.

So I wrote it for you.

—*James Kerti*

Pillar #1: Know who you are and what you're about.

*"I think self-awareness is probably the most important thing towards being a champion."
—Billie Jean King*

Awareness of yourself and your goals is essential when it comes to scouting effectively.

There are four important things right off the bat you need to be conscious of:

1.) Your level of experience.

If you're just starting out, you're probably not going to make a landmark basketball discovery.

At the beginning, you're learning about the scouting process as much as you are about any given game you're watching on the court.

But it won't feel that way. You'll feel so attached to getting it right—to not making a mistake. If you can't let go of needing to be perfect, you're toast.

Don't pressure yourself to be a hero.

Honor the learning process by taking it easy, soliciting feedback, and focusing on learning instead of always needing to be right.

Being married to being right all the time will ruin you.

Don't fight to be right.

2.) Your scouting muscle.

I believe that you have a scouting muscle.

It's like any other muscle in your body. You exercise it; it gets stronger. You don't exercise it; it atrophies.

Scouting requires a different mindset and a different level of focus. It is more intense and involved than watching a game as a spectator.

Watching a game with that mindset is a workout.

I've spent 14 hours in a gym watching AAU basketball games on hot summer days, and those days were as draining as any physical workout I've ever done. To handle those kinds of days, your scouting muscle has to be strong.

Your scouting muscle has to be exercised regularly.

And as with any weightlifting, you're going to need to start at the beginning with lighter weights, building proper form and habits and strengthening your muscles.

At first, maybe you watch games from a comfortable setting. You could watch at home on TV or go to a nearby high school, and plan on evaluating only one or two players each time.

Later on, you can try more intense environments and work more players into your evaluations.

When I first started, I went to a high school showcase and it was difficult for me to follow the action with focus for more than six or seven possessions at a time.

It was a frustrating experience. Why couldn't I do a better job? Why couldn't I stay focused and pick up on more details?

I knew I had two choices. I could calm down and simply do my best, without beating myself up about it not being enough, or I could give up.

I chose the first option. I kept scouting. I kept at it.

I went to more showcases the following weekends, and within a month, I had much-improved focus, allowing me to take in details about players' footwork and ball-handling I didn't pick up on earlier.

If I hadn't been willing to lift the small weights first, my career would never have gotten off the ground.

You wouldn't be reading this book.

If you try to scout beyond your capabilities, you're setting yourself up for failure.

Start where you are and put yourself in a position to succeed.

3.) What your limitations and goals are.

Your limitations as a scout vary depending on the strength of your scouting muscle.

But make no mistake—even the most experienced scouts have their limits.

You can not get a 100% accurate and fully comprehensive read on everything that's happening on the court. You can't. I don't care how good or experienced you are. It is not possible.

There's also an inverse relationship between how much you're trying to take in and how accurate your perspective is going to be.

I'll put it another way.

As you spread your focus across the court more and more, the less precise and detailed you'll be able to be.

If you're interested in evaluating just one player in the game, it's much easier to focus on that player and get an accurate read than if you are trying to take in the whole game and evaluate everyone.

When it's only one player you care about, you can watch him or her all night and see what's going on.

What does he do when guarding away from the ball?

Is he active on offense when he doesn't have the ball in his hands?

What's his body language like on the bench?

How does he communicate with his teammates when the team is losing?

If you're broadly evaluating a game and trying simply to pick out the best players, it's more difficult to be as detailed and accurate.

You have to understand what your goals are going in so that you can optimize your process, focus, and intentions to meet those goals.

4.) What your biases and preferences are.

I'm biased.

You're biased.

Deal with it.

We all have tastes for certain foods, hobbies, and movies. We love some. We dislike others.

The same concept carries over to basketball.

Maybe you love high-flying dunks, or perhaps you're the kind of person who would much rather watch an old VHS tape about the Triangle offense on a Friday night. (Hi, Coach!)

Let me tell you a story from my own experience.

At an AAU tournament a few years ago, I overheard a group of scouts talking about how “soft” they thought a particular player was.

This player was a big guard, and the scouts expected him to use his size to constantly bully smaller guards.

But this player was a big guard with more of a small guard’s game, getting to the basket at will, shooting threes, and setting up his teammates for easy baskets.

Because the scouts had these preconceived notions about what kind of player they thought this young guard should be, and because he didn’t meet them, they wrote him off as a player.

Despite the other scouts ignoring that player’s recruiting for years, he now plays for a national university that makes noise every March.

Whatever your preferences are, you need to be aware of them, or they will sabotage you.

Don’t mistake those statements for me saying that you need to be completely neutral at all times.

Basketball is meant to be appreciated, and I don’t think it’s possible to check all our biases at the door.

But by being aware of your biases when you’re scouting, you’ll gain the ability to put things in the proper perspective and allow you to have honest, self-aware evaluations that can be used in a constructive way.

For example, as of this writing, Russell Westbrook is one of the most divisive players in the NBA. Some people love him for his aggressiveness and dazzling skills, while others are turned off due to perceived questionable decision-making and basketball IQ.

Because of that divide, there are typically two camps of people in the public conversation

- a.) People who love Westbrook to the point that they ignore his faults completely.
- b.) People who refuse to acknowledge his strengths and harp endlessly on his weaknesses.

To be an effective scout, you have to step outside that red-blue debate and be willing to objectively analyze a player even when their game contains elements that you don’t care for.

An effective scout sees, for example, that Russell Westbrook is a player with definite strengths and definite weaknesses in his game.

An effective scout factors all those things into forming a comprehensive evaluation.

Pillar #2: Build supporting systems.

“The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration.”

— Thomas Edison

Preparation is an important part of scouting.

As in any business, you want to set yourself up to succeed from the beginning.

Think about it this way: there are a lot of moving parts on a basketball court.

If you try to wing it, you’re going to get overwhelmed.

In my experience, it’s much easier to be an effective scout when you’re able to come in with a calm, balanced state of mind.

Here are a few tips I have in building a system that works for you:

a.) Find writing materials that work well for you.

A notebook, a waiter’s pad, pen, pencil, whatever.

It’s important to be comfortable with what you’re using.

At first, you probably won’t know what works for you. Don’t worry about it.

But prepare as best you can. Don’t bring a writing pad that flops around in your hand like a dead fish when you try to take notes. And make sure you double-check you brought something to write with, so you don’t have to sheepishly ask Coach K to borrow a pen while imagining worst-case scenarios of him stabbing you in the eye with it.

A simple pen and a school notebook can do the trick for you. If you don’t know where to begin, start there.

Don’t let the materials be an obstacle to you focusing on the game at hand. You don’t need to overthink it, but make sure you’re prepared as best you can.

b.) Develop your own shorthand and style.

You don't have to know at the beginning exactly what will work for you. You should write in whatever way feels most comfortable to you. It's more important than anything else to feel comfortable with the way you take notes.

It can be helpful; however, to experiment with different ways of jotting things down. A player makes three-pointers on back-to-back possession—what do you do?

Do you write, "Bynum made back-to-back threes?"

Do you write the number 3 twice next to his name?

Do you draw a smiley face eating two number 3s?

Do you ignore the result and instead make a couple notes about the form on his jump shot?

Over time, experiment and see which method feels most comfortable when it comes to recording your thoughts and insights. It doesn't matter what you do, but you must do something that you feel comfortable with and helps you get the results you want. And if they allow you to take notes quickly, even better.

There are a lot of things happening on the court—it's important to be able to keep up.

You're going to need to be able to document what happens on particular plays sometimes. Make sure you are able to record it quickly enough while being able to understand your notes when you return to them later.

c.) Consider your organizational system.

Are you going to transfer your evaluations into some sort of computer document or database?

Are you cataloging them somehow so you can find them more quickly later?

Do you feel more comfortable taking notes during the game as you go, or watching silently and writing your report after the fact?

How much information do you want to gather ahead of time about the players you're going to watch?

While more information can be beneficial, it can also overtake your ability to form your own opinions. This herd mentality can be quite detrimental. Other people's opinions can pollute your own. When it happens, it leaves you reflecting on your work years later

wondering how you could have been so wrong. If you look at the biggest draft busts over the last 30 years and pay attention to what people were saying at the time, you'll see herd mentality at work.

Whatever process you take to gathering and organizing information, keep the end result in mind throughout in order to avoid bottlenecks.

You don't want to end up with a bunch of disorganized notes and clippings of information from various sources.

It's important to be able to find what you need when you need it throughout every step of the scouting process.

d.) Play around with developing a mental DVR.

Try to keep a mental playback of the last couple possessions you're watching.

By doing so, you avoid getting hung up on who finishes the play.

The thunderous dunk to cap off a possession is meaningful, but sometimes it's the rebound in traffic and the precise pass that leads to the dunk two passes later that's more significant.

By systematizing your process along the way, you become more effective, both at the game and afterward.

Pillar 3: Embrace context and uncertainty.

*"If there's one thing that's certain in business, it's uncertainty."
—Stephen Covey*

Being able to put what you're seeing in proper context is an essential skill for a basketball scout.

It's important to remember that what you're seeing on any given day or night is highly driven by environmental factors such as level of competition, schedule, coaching, teammates, and even more random things like illness, off the court stresses, and luck.

A high school playoff game is a different setting than an AAU game in a gym with college coaches watching.

A skilled player in a high pick-and-roll based system will look different compared to when that same player operates in a Triangle offense.

A long-range shooter will look better shooting wide open threes off the catch than when he has to create his own shots against double-teams.

Experience and deliberate practice help you gain the skills to make those adjustments in your head. And by deliberate practice, I mean that you must be consciously practicing making these adjustments.

I like to compare my evaluations of a player over time and see how the reports differ. Then I try to figure out **why** they differ.

Why do I love his shooting ability now but I didn't like it a year ago?

Did the player simply have bad shooting nights the first couple times I saw him?

Maybe he improved his jump shot? What did I say about his form the first time I saw him, compared to now?

What kind of shots was he taking last year? Maybe they were off-balance, contested shots the first time, and now he's adjusted and is taking open rhythm threes off the catch?

Or maybe my evaluation the first time or now is simply off the mark?

By making comparisons and investigating, you can form more complete evaluations of the players you watch while taking your own skills to new levels.

Your evaluations won't stand up to scrutiny without a genuine attempt to put what you're seeing into proper context.

You also have to accept that sometimes you simply won't have good opportunities to evaluate a player.

Sometimes you'll watch a player twice, and find out later that you saw his or her best (or worst) two games of the last year.

Players play in dozens of games every season, and unless you're somehow watching every single game, you never know exactly what you're going to get.

A lot of rookie scouts slip up because they're too attached to figuring out every player they see.

When those scouts see a player make a good play or a bad play, they read into it and draw a conclusion right away about that player.

Then once that early conclusion has been drawn, everything else the scout sees that player do either confirms the initial assessment or gets subconsciously discarded.

It's a dangerous way of evaluating. It will lead you astray and destroy you. I've seen scouts get embarrassed because they fell in love with the wrong player at first sight.

You have to accept that what you're watching on any given day may be insufficient to draw a strong conclusion as to what kind of player you're watching.

Pillar #4: Focus first on what a player does well.

"If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. I'm positive that a doer makes mistakes."

—John Wooden

It's easy in today's 24/7 media cycle and online basketball discussions to pick apart players and zero in on what they can't do.

"He doesn't guard anyone."

"He can't shoot."

"He has no left hand."

While you certainly take a player's weaknesses into consideration, it's negligent to outright dismiss a player because of them.

When you focus on a player's weaknesses, you build negative momentum in evaluating that player.

It leads you to end up with a pessimistic view of them that doesn't tell you anything constructive about how that player could help a team win. Your evaluation makes it look like any team would be foolish to use that player.

It's much easier for a good coach to hide an otherwise talented player's glaring weaknesses than it is for that same coach to turn an all-around mediocre player into a solid contributor.

Steve Nash may not be a good defender and Dwyane Wade may not be a good shooter, but they're excellent players in spite of those drawbacks, and their teams are happy to plan their personnel and schemes to maximize those players' strengths and minimize their weaknesses.

Note a player's deficiencies, but instead of dismissing him or her immediately because of them, remember to look for his or her strengths too and to take them into consideration. Continue watching with open eyes.

Despite the way the media tells the story sometimes, basketball games are won by players doing things well. Talking about a player “choking” may get more page views, but it’s an overly simplistic explanation of a complex game.

Learn to find what works well for a player and you’ll be ahead in the scouting game.

Putting it all together...

*“Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.”
—Vince Lombardi*

I believe that these **Four Pillars of Effective Scouting** will serve you well in developing as a basketball scout.

Looking back (and forward) on my own journey, I found that these four ideas were at the core of the successes I’ve had, and a failure to practice them at other times led to setbacks and mistakes.

I called this book a “cheat sheet” for a reason.

It’s meant to be used as a reference containing key points for you to keep in mind on your journey.

These Pillars are meant to be practiced deliberately.

Pillar #1: Know who you are and what you’re about.

By starting where you are, building your scouting muscle, and being aware of your biases and preferences, you’ll come out ahead.

Pillar #2: Build supporting systems.

Have systems that enable you to be at your best.

Pillar #3: Embrace context and uncertainty.

Look at what is really going on beneath the surface.

Pillar #4: Focus first on what a player does well.

Remember to explore what a player does well without getting completely turned off by his or her weaknesses.

The more you practice these Four Pillars when you're scouting, the better you'll get not only at these specific principles, but in your overall evaluations.

Whether you're going to local high school, college, or professional games, or you're watching on television or online, these principles will guide you on your way.

You'll achieve not only your current scouting goals, but your future ones too.

What's next?

Now that you know the Four Pillars, I want to leave you with five suggestions for what you can do next to put them into action.

1. Watch film.

If you have access to actual game tape, great! If not, there are plenty of full games archived on YouTube for you to watch. Film can sometimes serve as better practice than live scouting because it allows you to rewind and watch things at your own pace.

2. Attend a game locally.

It doesn't matter what the level of play is. Any kind of game will help you practice. Watch various levels of play if you can because it will help you improve at imagining players independent of their current environment.

3. Watch a team practice.

It's probably easiest for you to watch a practice at the high school level, although some colleges are pretty open about it as well. Just reach out to the coach and ask if it would be okay if you stopped by to watch them. Through this behind the scenes look, you'll be able to learn and pick up on things you wouldn't be able to see as easily during games.

4. Take inventory of your biases and preferences.

I like to do this exercise from time to time. Take out a sheet of paper and make a list of players and teams you think highly of. Then make another list of players and teams you don't particularly like. By noticing themes and commonalities, you'll gain extra insight about your own perspective.

5. Reach out to another scout and make a connection.

Talking with other scouts gives you additional perspectives about what to look for when evaluating players. Early on in my scouting career, networking helped me immensely in seeing the details other scouts with more experience could pick up on.

These action steps help you practice the Four Pillars while gaining experience and new connections to help you grow and advance.

Thank you so much for reading this Cheat Sheet.

Keep me posted on how you're putting these principles into practice in your scouting journey, and let me know what kind of material you'd like to see in the future.

I'll do my best to respond quickly.

And do you have a friend who would benefit from reading this Cheat Sheet? Share it with them and let me know what they think too.

—**James Kerti**

HoopsThink.com

james@jameskerti.com

[@JamesKerti](https://www.instagram.com/JamesKerti)

P.S. Make sure you're on the email list at HoopsThink.com, because if you're interested in going a step farther with this work, I can help you!

