

The Rise and Fall of Ja Morant

A Statistical Account, 2017–2026

GRAVITY Research Note No. 1

July 10, 2026

Abstract

We measure every season of Ja Morant’s career — college, rise, peak, and collapse — with one rating system (GRAVITY) applied the same way to every player in every season, so his trajectory can be read in a single currency. Three findings organize the paper. **(1) The rise was real:** from an average-ish rookie to the 97th percentile of the league in 2021–22. **(2) The collapse was about missing, not choosing:** of his shooting-efficiency crash in 2025–26, 88% came from shots not going in and only 12% from worse shot selection — while his playmaking hit a career high. **(3) Much of the “decline” is too small a sample to trust:** the three-point collapse everyone saw covers just 85 attempts, a range where cold streaks happen to healthy players, and his free-throw shooting — the purest touch test — actually *improved*, significantly. The fall of Ja Morant is, by the numbers, mostly an *availability* story: 79 games played in three seasons. His rank of #140 of 644 prices that risk correctly. It probably underprices the talent, and we show exactly where the difference lives.

1 Introduction

Between March 2019 and March 2022, Ja Morant went from unranked recruit to the second pick of the draft, Rookie of the Year, Most Improved Player, All-NBA, and the face of a 56-win team. Between March 2022 and June 2026 he collected two firearm suspensions (33 games), a season-ending shoulder surgery, a season-ending elbow injury, a one-game team suspension, and finally a trade to Portland for two role players.

Everyone has a story about this arc. This paper has measurements. We run every Morant season through GRAVITY, the player-rating system behind our July 2026 ranking of all 644 NBA players, and we show the arithmetic at every step. Where the numbers can’t support a firm conclusion — and in a 569-minute season they often can’t — we say so with confidence intervals instead of adjectives.

2 How the rating works (the short version)

GRAVITY asks two questions about a player. *How good is he per minute on the floor?* — measured by blending box-score impact, scoring efficiency relative to his offensive burden, playmaking, defense, and team on/off data (garbage-time filtered, from Cleaning the Glass). *And how much can you actually count on him?* — measured by games played, role size, and documented injuries. The two multiply. A per-minute star who misses most of the season lands well below his talent level, on purpose.

Everything is expressed in **z-scores**: how many standard deviations a player sits above or below the league-average minute. As a reading guide: 0 is league average, +1 is clearly good, +2 is elite, +3 is historic; negative is below average. The final score is put on a friendly scale,

$$G = 50 + 15 \times (\text{per-minute impact, shrunk for small samples}) \times (\text{availability} \times \text{role} \times \text{injury}), \quad (1)$$

so that 50 = an average NBA minute, 60+ = a quality starter, 80+ = a franchise engine (the 2025–26 maximum is Nikola Jokić at 97.8). The full specification — every component, weight, and shrinkage rule, seventeen equations of it — is in Appendix A, and the historical variant used for the seven-season series (GRAVITY-RS) is defined there too. Nothing in the body of the paper requires it; every table can be read with the z-score guide above.

In plain terms: GRAVITY = (how good per minute) × (how reliably he’s on the floor), graded against the whole league, every season, by the same formula. No opinions, no reputation, no external rankings.

3 College, 2017–2019: what the numbers saw and what they missed

Morant arrived at Murray State as an unranked three-star recruit with no high-major offers, famously spotted by an assistant coach in a side gym at a July 2016 camp. Two years later he was a consensus All-American and the #2 pick.

Table 1: Morant at Murray State. The jump to watch is the assist percentage — the share of teammate baskets he created — from 33.1% to an absurd 51.8%.

Season	G	MPG	PTS	REB	AST	TS%	3P%	FT%	USG%	AST%	BPM
2017–18 (FR)	32	34.0	12.7	6.5	6.3	.569	.307	.806	20.4	33.1	5.2
2018–19 (SO)	33	36.6	24.5	5.7	10.0	.612	.363	.813	33.3	51.8	10.0

His sophomore year made him the first Division I player ever to average 20 points and 10 assists. Here is the interesting experiment: feed that season into the same college production model GRAVITY uses to grade modern draft classes, standardized against the 2026 first-round cohort. The model scores a prospect on college BPM, efficiency, usage, and win shares:

Table 2: College Morant vs. the 2026 first-round cohort, in cohort z-scores. The production blend sees an ordinary lottery pick. The column it ignores is the outlier.

	BPM	TS%	USG%	WS/40	AST%
Morant 2018–19	10.0	.612	33.3	.273	51.8
2026 cohort mean	11.6	.604	25.9	.211	20.9
z-score	−0.54	+0.21	+1.71	+1.47	+3.53
Production blend = $0.5(-0.54) + 0.2(0.21) + 0.15(1.71) + 0.15(1.47) = +0.25$ (nearly nothing)					

By raw production, prime-prospect Morant was *unremarkable* — his college BPM sits below the 2026 first-round average (Cameron Boozer alone posted 18.7). What the formula excludes is the assist rate: +3.5 standard deviations above the cohort, 8.8 points higher than anyone in it. And creation turns out to be the one skill that survived every disaster of his career (Section 6). The model would have missed Ja Morant, and the miss is instructive.

In plain terms: College Ja looked statistically ordinary for a lottery pick — except for the passing, which was a one-in-thousands outlier that the standard formula doesn't even count. Lesson learned: creation now belongs in the draft model.

4 The rise, 2019–2022

Table 3 is the paper's centerpiece: every component of Morant's game, every season, graded against that season's league. Figure 1 plots the combined rating.

Table 3: The component matrix. Every cell is a z-score against that season's league (0 = average, +1 = good, +2 = elite, +3 = historic). IMPACT is the weighted combination; Pct is his percentile among 1,000+ minute players. Bold marks career highs and lows.

Season	MP	Box	WinSh	Volume	Effic.	Creation	Load	Stocks	Rebound	Rim	IMPACT	Pct
2019–20	2074	0.10	-0.22	0.69	-0.20	1.96	1.62	-0.74	-0.75	0.58	+0.24	63
2020–21	2053	-0.13	-0.45	0.77	-0.83	1.84	1.67	-0.88	-0.78	1.18	+0.04	55
2021–22	1889	2.06	1.18	2.55	0.25	2.13	2.50	-0.31	-0.22	0.86	+1.74	97
2022–23	1948	1.93	0.82	2.15	-0.72	2.91	2.92	-0.47	-0.07	1.20	+1.59	94
2023–24	318	0.99	0.38	1.60	-0.28	3.02	2.45	-0.61	-0.31	1.19	+0.63	80
2024–25	1519	0.80	0.17	1.81	-0.38	2.16	2.39	-0.44	-0.65	1.11	+0.81	83
2025–26	569	-0.48	- 1.31	1.30	- 1.75	3.19	2.90	-0.47	- 0.89	0.82	- 0.11	43

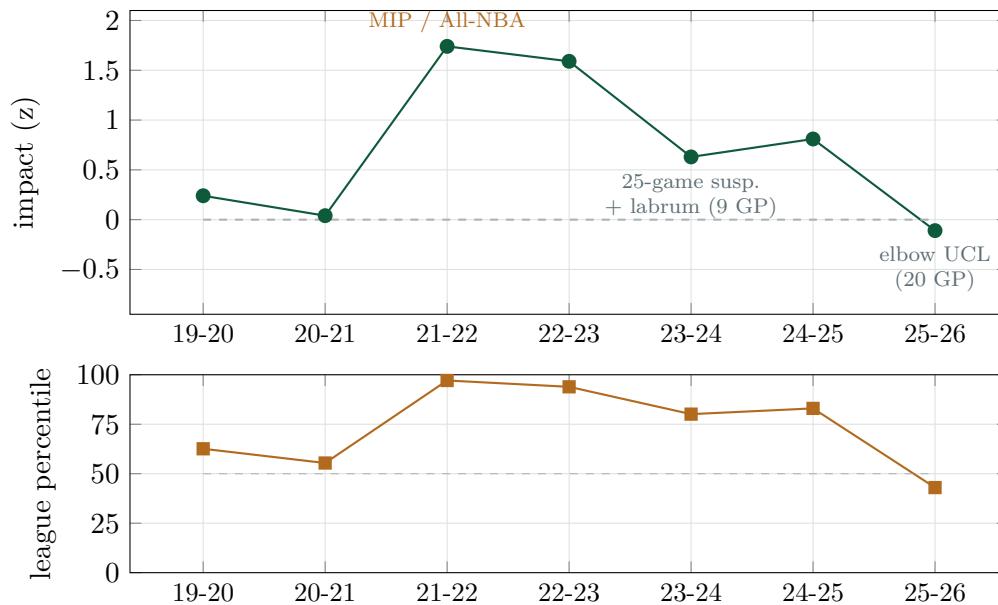


Figure 1: The arc. Top: per-season impact in z units (dashed line = league average). Bottom: the same thing as a percentile — in 2021–22 he was better than 97% of the league's rotation players; in 2025–26, better than 43%.

Three things stand out. First, the leap was a *scoring* leap, not a passing one: from 2020–21 to 2021–22 his volume z jumps $0.77 \rightarrow 2.55$, while his creation was already elite ($\approx +1.9$) as a rookie. Morant didn't learn to create; he learned to convert volume. Second, the leap held up in the playoffs, where it counts: an **8.4 playoff BPM** across two rounds in 2022 (27.1 points,

9.8 rebounds, 8.0 assists per game against Minnesota and Golden State) — at age 22, one of the strongest postseason signals any young guard has posted. Third, even at the summit there was a crack, visible in the Efficiency column: at his career-peak usage in 2022–23 (98th percentile of the league), his efficiency-for-that-burden was already *negative* (-0.72). The engine was extraordinary. The fuel economy never was.

In plain terms: 2021–22 Ja was a genuine top-10-caliber season (97th percentile), confirmed in the playoffs. But even peak Ja scored a lot without scoring *efficiently* — a flaw that was survivable at 22 and became the whole story at 26.

5 The interruption years, 2023–2025

Then the availability collapsed. Table 4 is the ledger.

Table 4: The absence ledger. From the 2023 playoffs through June 2026, Morant appeared in 79 of a possible 249 regular-season games — 31.7%.

Date	Event	Consequence	Games lost
Mar 4, 2023	Firearm on Instagram Live (Denver)	League suspension	8
May 13, 2023	Second firearm video	League suspension	25
Jan 2024	Shoulder labrum tear (practice)	Surgery; season over	73
Nov 2025	“Go ask the coach” episode	Team suspension	1
Dec 2025	Right calf soreness	Two-week absence	~7
Jan 21, 2026	Left elbow ligament sprain (vs. ATL)	Season over	33
Jun 29, 2026	Traded to Portland for Grant & Murray	—	—

Two details in this stretch resist the standard telling. His nine-game 2023–24 cameo was *good* (25.1 points, 8.1 assists per game, 80th-percentile impact) before the shoulder ended it. And 2024–25, the forgotten season, was genuinely solid: over 1,519 minutes he graded at the 83rd percentile — roughly a top-50 player when on the floor — with a 94th-percentile foul-drawing rate. Morant did not slide gently for three years. He was a clearly good player right up until 2025–26, and then he fell off a ledge in one season.

6 The collapse season, 2025–26: three answers

Twenty games, 569 minutes: 19.5 points on .410 shooting, 8.1 assists, and the worst efficiency of his life. The season ended January 21 with an elbow ligament sprain, two games after he returned from a calf absence. We ask three questions of it.

6.1 Question 1: did his whole game collapse?

No — and this is the strangest fact in the paper. Compare the last two rows of Table 3, drawn in Figure 2. Every efficiency-linked number cratered to career-worst levels. And at the same time his **creation** (+3.19) and **offensive load** (+2.90) **hit career highs** — his assist rate (44.7%) was a 96th-percentile figure. The player in those 20 games was a career-best distributor carrying a career-peak burden who could not put the ball in the basket. That combination — process intact, outcomes broken — is what a cold streak looks like, not what an eroded athlete looks like.

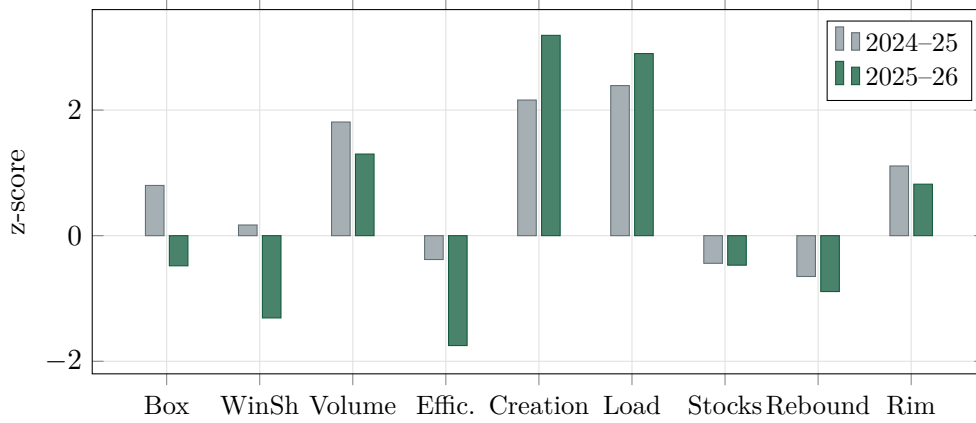


Figure 2: The paradox season. Green bars (2025–26) vs. grey (2024–25): the two tallest green bars — creation and load — are career highs; the efficiency bars are career lows.

6.2 Question 2: bad shots, or missed shots?

The visible symptom was an ugly shot diet: 46% of his attempts from mid-range, long twos tripling. Everyone blamed the shot selection. The accounting disagrees. Using CTG zone data (where shots came from, and how often they went in), the change in effective field-goal percentage between 2024–25 and 2025–26 splits *exactly* into a shot-selection part and a shot-making part:

$$\Delta \text{eFG} = \underbrace{\sum_z (f'_z - f_z) \bar{a}_z w_z}_{\text{selection (where)}} + \underbrace{\sum_z \bar{f}_z (a'_z - a_z) w_z}_{\text{making (whether)}}, \quad (2)$$

where f_z is the share of shots from zone z , a_z the accuracy there, and threes get their extra 50% credit (w_z). The split is symmetric — neither part is favored.

Table 5: Where vs. whether, 2024–25 → 2025–26. His eFG fell about 5.7 points; selection explains 0.7 of them.

	Rim	Short mid	Long mid	Corner 3	Non-corner 3	eFG
Share of shots (24–25)	33%	35%	4%	6%	21%	.510
Accuracy (24–25)	62%	45%	39%	35%	32%	
Share of shots (25–26)	30%	37%	9%	4%	20%	.453
Accuracy (25–26)	61%	40%	39%	50%	19%	

Total drop = −5.7 pts = selection −0.7 + making −5.0
 If he'd kept the *old diet* at the new accuracy: eFG = .462 (barely helps)
 If he'd hit the *new diet* at the old accuracy: eFG = .505 (nearly normal)

88% of the collapse was missing, not choosing. Had he converted his ugly new shot diet at his normal rates, his efficiency would have been almost fine (.505). Fixing the diet without fixing the makes recovers almost nothing (.462). The shot chart looked broken because the shots missed, not mainly because of where they were taken.

6.3 Question 3: is the missing even real?

Missing, then — over what sample? A 95% confidence interval answers the question every hot take skips: *given this few attempts, where could his true shooting level plausibly be?* (Formally we use

Wilson score intervals; the formula is Appendix A, eq. 13.)

Table 6: 2025–26 shooting splits with 95% confidence bands. Read the last column: only one split moved beyond doubt, and it moved *up*.

Split	Made/Att	Season	Plausible range	Career	Verdict
3P%	20/85	.235	[.158, .336]	≈.315	career norm inside the band
FG%	132/322	.410	[.358, .464]	≈.465	borderline
Rim FG%	48/73	.658	[.544, .756]	≈.62	fully consistent
FT%	105/117	.897	[.829, .940]	.776	significantly better

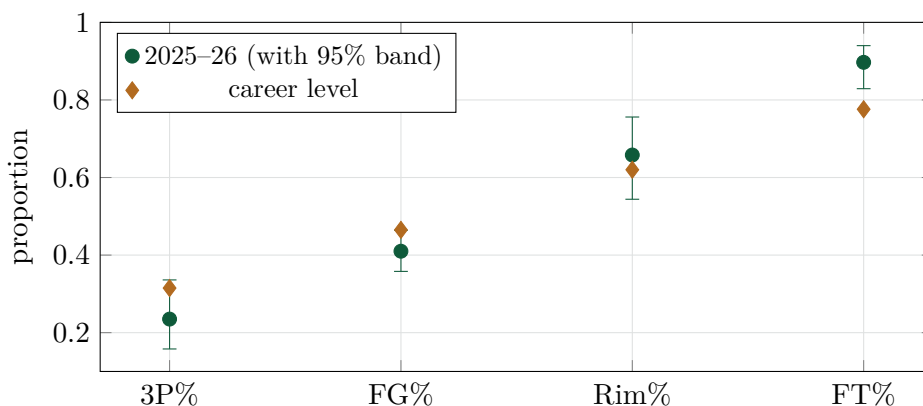


Figure 3: The sample-size problem, drawn. Green dots: 2025–26, with the range his true level could plausibly occupy. Amber diamonds: career levels. Three of four bands contain his career level. The one clear change is the free throw — upward.

The three-point collapse — the number most responsible for the “he’s done” narrative — rests on 85 attempts, and its band comfortably contains his career norm. Meanwhile the free throw, the purest touch test in basketball, improved so much the band excludes his career average from *below*. A player whose shooting had physically degraded does not go .897 from the line on 117 attempts.

In plain terms: Three answers: (1) his playmaking hit a career high while the shooting failed; (2) the failure was 88% missing, 12% shot selection; (3) at 85 threes, the missing itself is within the range of a cold streak — and his free-throw touch got *better*. The one caveat that is real: his rim-attack rate has been sliding for seven years (Figure 4).

6.4 The seven-season shot profile

Career context, and the one concession the optimistic reading must make. His rim frequency has eroded steadily since the rookie peak — from 49% of attempts to 30% (Figure 4) — a real, slow trend consistent with age and injury. But the accuracy panel (Figure 5) shows what actually distinguished the collapse year: the three-ball fell out of its seven-year band, on the smallest sample, while rim conversion held steady and the free throw kept climbing.

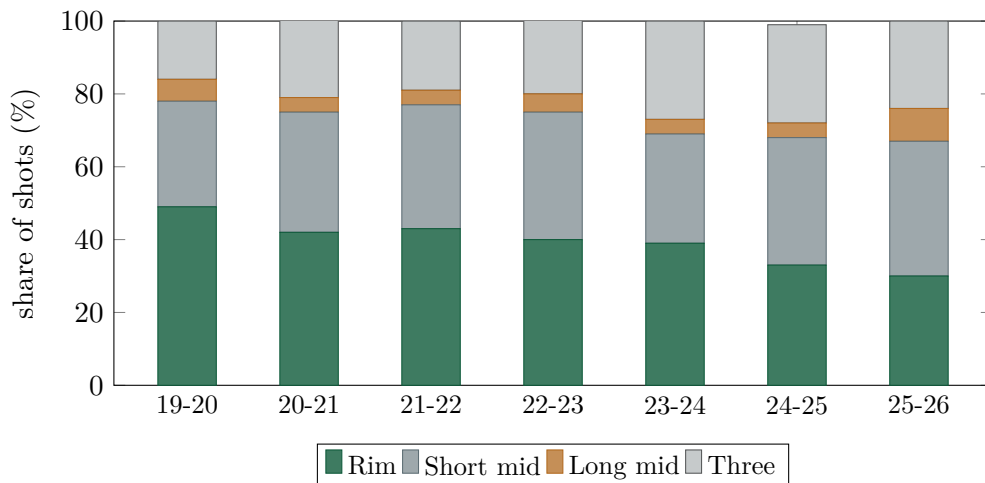


Figure 4: Where his shots come from, by season. The green (rim) share halves across seven years — the one long-run decline in the data that is unambiguously real.

7 How #140 happens

Table 7 runs Morant through the full GRAVITY pipeline, step by step (equation numbers refer to Appendix A). Notice what the arithmetic does and doesn't say. His blended two-season rate (+0.30) still describes an above-average NBA player. What produces #140 is the reliability stack: availability 0.896 (29 weighted games against a 55-game standard), role 0.958, injury override 0.950 — multiplying to 0.815 of his value above replacement. GRAVITY prices Morant like an asset with a high expected return and terrible delivery risk. Four days after the ranking date, an actual front office priced him identically, trading him for two salary-matching forwards.

Table 7: The GRAVITY pipeline for Morant, July 2026, every step shown.

Step	Quantity	Value
Impact, 2025–26 [eq. 7]	569 minutes, on/off +1.5	−0.094
Impact, 2024–25 [eq. 7]	1519 minutes	+0.751
Blend weight [eq. 8]	recent season counts 0.75× per minute	0.529
Blended rate	$0.529(-0.094) + 0.471(0.751)$	+0.304
Small-sample shrink [eq. 9]	$c = \sqrt{2088/2200}$ toward replacement	+0.248
Playoff / age terms	—	0, 0
Availability [eq. 10]	29 weighted games of 55	× 0.896
Role size [eq. 11]	28.4 min/game	× 0.958
Injury override [eq. 12]	elbow ligament, season-ending	× 0.950
Final z	$-1.9 + (0.248 + 1.9)(0.815)$	−0.149
gravity score	$50 + 15(-0.149)$	47.8
Rank	of 644 (all veterans + 2026 draft class)	#140

8 What Portland is getting: three scenarios

Morant enters 2026–27 at 27, sharing a backcourt with Damian Lillard (36, returning from an Achilles rupture), on a roster that just made the playoffs without either of them. The framework

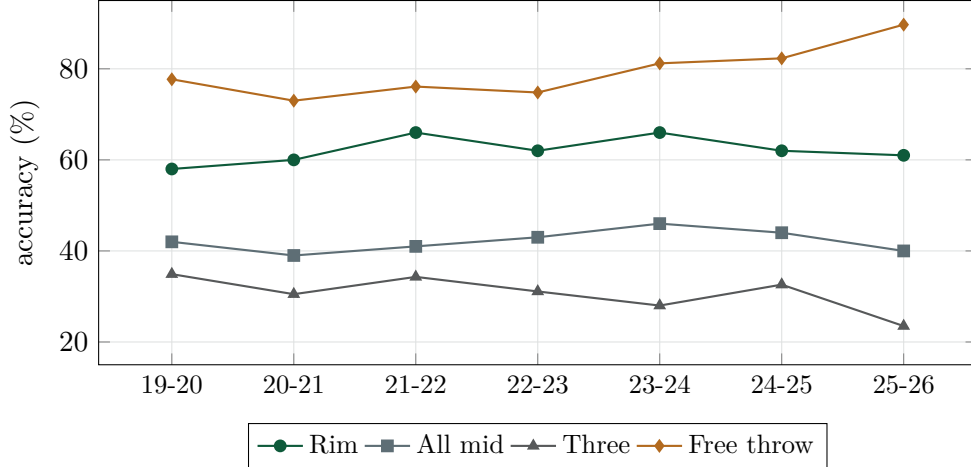


Figure 5: Whether they go in, by season. Rim conversion (green) holds a seven-year band; the free throw (amber) climbs to .897; the three (grey) crashes — on 85 attempts. The two purest touch measures moving in opposite directions is the season’s central oddity, and randomness is its cheapest explanation.

converts directly into forward scenarios: assume a 2026–27 performance level and games played, and the same pipeline produces a score.

Table 8: Three futures, same arithmetic.

Scenario	Impact	GP	Projected score	Equivalent band
Repeat collapse	-0.10	25	≈ 45	#170–#220
2024–25 redux (base)	+0.80	62	≈ 58	#42–#55
2021–23 restoration	+1.65	65	≈ 69	#8–#14

The paper’s math argues the base case is livelier than the market’s. The skills that collapse first in genuinely declining guards — rim conversion, foul drawing, free-throw touch — are respectively stable, elite (seven straight seasons at the 86th percentile or better), and improving. The things that collapsed are the ones a confidence interval refuses to certify. Against that stand the two real risks: a rim-attack rate that has halved in seven years, and the availability record of Table 4. The binding constraint on Ja Morant has never been a shooting slump. It is that since 2023 he has played 31.7% of his team’s games. GRAVITY will believe the rise again when the denominator does.

9 Conclusion

Measured with one instrument across seven seasons, Morant’s career is a steep genuine rise ($+1.7\sigma$, twice), an availability catastrophe, and one 569-minute season the data cannot fully judge. The collapse was concentrated in shot-making (88%); the shot-making collapse was concentrated in the smallest samples (85 threes); and the noise-proof skills — creation, foul drawing, rim conversion, free-throw touch — were at or near career bests. #140 of 644 is the right price for the risk. It is probably the wrong forecast of the talent. Both statements are the same mathematics, read in two directions.

A The full GRAVITY specification

For completeness; nothing in the body requires this section. Let season y have player set \mathcal{P}_y with minutes m_i . For any statistic $x_k(i)$, minutes-weighted moments and clipped z-scores are

$$\mu_k = \frac{\sum_i m_i x_k(i)}{\sum_i m_i}, \quad \sigma_k = \left(\frac{\sum_i m_i (x_k(i) - \mu_k)^2}{\sum_i m_i} \right)^{1/2}, \quad z_k(i) = \text{clip}((x_k(i) - \mu_k)/\sigma_k, \pm 4). \quad (3)$$

Component constructions:

$$\text{eff}(i) = (\text{TS}_i - \mu_{\text{TS}}) \cdot 100 \cdot (\text{clip}(\text{USG}_i, 8, 36)/20)^{0.7}, \quad (4)$$

$$\text{creation}(i) = \text{AST}\%_i - 0.55 \text{TOV}\%_i, \quad \text{load}(i) = \text{USG}_i + 0.4 \text{AST}\%_i, \quad (5)$$

$$\text{stocks}(i) = 2 \text{STL}\%_i + 1.2 \text{BLK}\%_i, \quad \text{rim}(i) = 100 \text{FTr}_i + 200 \cdot \text{dunk share}_i. \quad (6)$$

Skill blend (current season): $S = 0.27z_{\text{vol}} + 0.19z_{\text{eff}} + 0.22z_{\text{crea}} + 0.09z_{\text{load}} + 0.10z_{\text{stk}} + 0.05z_{\text{reb}} + 0.08z_{\text{rim}}$. Season impact, with CTG filtered on/off regressed by minutes and a within-season small-sample shrink:

$$I_y(i) = \left[0.44z_{\text{BPM}} + 0.12z_{\text{WS}/48} + 0.14z(\Delta_{\text{on/off}} \min(1, m_i/2400)) + 0.30S \right] \sqrt{\min(1, m_i/800)}. \quad (7)$$

Two-year blend and credibility shrink toward replacement $\rho = -1.9$:

$$w = \frac{0.75m_y}{0.75m_y + 0.25m_{y-1}}, \quad R = wI_y + (1-w)I_{y-1}, \quad (8)$$

$$\tilde{R} = cR + (1-c)\rho, \quad c = \sqrt{\frac{\min(m_y + m_{y-1}, 2200)}{2200}}. \quad (9)$$

Playoff evidence $\pi = \text{clip}(0.12(\text{BPM}^{p\circ} - \text{BPM}^{r\circ}) \min(1, m^{p\circ}/300)/2.6, \pm 0.30)$; age nudge α (+0.055/yr under 24, $-0.045/\text{yr}$ past 30, clipped $[-0.30, 0.25]$). Reliability multipliers:

$$A = 0.78 + 0.22 \min(1, (0.7g_y + 0.3g_{y-1})/55), \quad (10)$$

$$\Phi = 0.62 + 0.38 \min(1, \max(\text{mpg}_y, 0.85 \text{mpg}_{y-1})/32), \quad (11)$$

$$J \in [0.78, 1.00] \text{ (documented injury override)}. \quad (12)$$

Final score: $G = 50 + 15[\rho + (\tilde{R} + \pi + \alpha - \rho)A\Phi J]$. The historical variant GRAVITY-RS used for Table 3 deletes the on/off term (not uniformly available pre-2024) and renormalizes: $I^{RS} = [0.533z_{\text{BPM}} + 0.133z_{\text{WS}/48} + 0.333S'] \sqrt{\min(1, m/800)}$, with S' using prior-season skill weights and a free-throw-rate-only rim term. Wilson 95% intervals used in Section 6.3:

$$p \in \left(\hat{p} + \frac{z^2}{2n} \pm z \sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{n} + \frac{z^2}{4n^2}} \right) / (1 + z^2/n), \quad z = 1.96. \quad (13)$$

Data

Basketball-Reference league, player and playoff tables (2019–20 to 2025–26); Cleaning the Glass subscriber database (filtered on/off, shot zones, foul drawing), accessed July 10, 2026; Sports-Reference CBB. The specification is identical to the July 10, 2026 “The 644” ranking (v3), in which Morant’s pipeline values appear verbatim. No external rankings or projections were consulted.

References

- [1] Basketball-Reference.com, league and player tables, accessed July 10, 2026.
- [2] Cleaning the Glass, player on/off and shooting tables (subscription), accessed July 10, 2026.
<https://cleaningtheglass.com/stats/player/4573>
- [3] Sports-Reference College Basketball, Temetrius “Ja” Morant player page.
- [4] “Grizzlies rule Ja Morant out for rest of season due to elbow sprain,” Yahoo Sports / NBA.com news, February 2026.
- [5] “Why was Ja Morant suspended? What we know about the latest Grizzlies drama,” ESPN.com, November 2025.
- [6] NBA Communications, 25-game suspension announcement, June 16, 2023.
- [7] ESPN.com 2026 offseason trade tracker: Grizzlies trade Morant to Trail Blazers for Jerami Grant and Kris Murray, June 29, 2026.