



# NBA AT THE BREAK

## BETTING PRIMER

# CONTENDERS & PRETENDERS

CATCH UP ON WHAT YOU'VE MISSED IN THE NBA

### OUR FREE PRIMER INCLUDES

- FUTURES BETS TO MAKE RIGHT NOW
- EASTERN & WESTERN CONFERENCE ANALYSIS
- ATS BETTING TIPS FOR THE REST OF THE SEASON

It's no secret that we love football at VSiN. However, with the Kansas City Chiefs earning a 25-22 overtime victory over the San Francisco 49ers in Super Bowl LVIII, things are about to slow down on the NFL front. That means basketball will take center stage at VSiN.com for a couple of months, and we want to bring everybody up to speed on what's been happening in The Association.

The "NBA At The Break Betting Primer" is a newer concept for us, but one we felt was necessary. Plenty of NBA fans have been betting since Opening Night, but many jump in once football ends. Regardless, we're confident this guide will be beneficial for everyone. With that said, keep reading to find:

- Eastern Conference team-by-team analysis from VSiN senior editor Zachary Cohen
- Western Conference team-by-team analysis from VSiN NBA analyst Jonathan Von Tobel
- An updated look at the MVP picture from VSiN producer Kelley Bydlon
- Team and player futures that still hold value from Zach and JVT

Throughout the season, Zach and JVT have been writing daily articles for VSiN.com, and both have had plenty of success thus far. They'll continue to provide analysis on sides, totals, and player props in written form. You'll also receive daily trends and analytics from VSiN Director of Analytics Steve Makinen. On top of that, you'll find picks from our tremendous on-air talent on the VSiN Betting Picks page.

If you're not familiar with VSiN, we are The Sports Betting Network, available 24/7 on VSiN.com as well as video and audio platforms. You can listen to us for free on the iHeartRadio App or watch on YouTube TV as part of the Sports Plus package. Alternatively, you can go to our VSiN Live YouTube page and subscribe to watch for \$3.99/month.

We're proud of the work we're doing covering the NBA, and we hope this guide gets you as excited as we are about betting on this great league. So, enjoy all this information, and make sure you join us for the rest of the season.

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# VSIN EXPERT NBA

# BEST BETS

## ZACHARY COHEN

### Phoenix Suns To Win NBA Title (14-1)

The Suns have some work to do in order to avoid the Play-In Tournament, but they'll like their chances of going all the way if they can. Of course, Phoenix would have a tough road because of a lousy start to the season, but does anybody in the conference have it easy? The Western Conference Playoffs will be an absolute gauntlet, but Phoenix will have an advantage in the talent department in most matchups. That makes it hard to lay off the Suns at these odds. I don't think much separates them from the Clippers and Nuggets. And I tend to think the winner of the Western Conference will win the title.

### Cleveland Cavaliers To Win NBA Title (28-1)

I mentioned this in my Cavaliers analysis, but I like this as a play to potentially hedge later. I liked it a lot more when I wrote it up at 45-1 at VSIN.com a few weeks ago, but I wouldn't hate taking a shot at it at anything north of 25-1. The Eastern Conference is a little more open than people think, with the Celtics playing a brand of basketball that gives them a high variance — and the Bucks and Sixers both having their own issues. That leaves the door open for the Knicks and Cavaliers, but I like the price on Cleveland a little more.

### Bogdan Bogdanovic To Win 6th Man of the Year (29-1)

It feels like this award is down to six players (Tim Hardaway Jr., Malik Monk, Norman Powell, Bogdanovic, Caris LeVert, Jordan Clarkson). Well, Bogdanovic has the best Estimated Plus-Minus of all of them, yet he's available at some of the best odds. With that in mind, I think it's worth throwing a little something on him. Sure, the Hawks have been disappointing this season, but they're still likely to make the Play-In Tournament. If they do, I don't see why Bogdanovic wouldn't get serious consideration here. His counting stats are right on par with the best scorers of the bunch, but he has been more efficient than all of them.

## JONATHAN VON TOBEL

### Golden State Warriors To Make The Playoffs (+150)

This is a small price to invest in with a few months left in the season, but Golden State is starting to turn things around. Draymond Green returned from suspension and the Warriors are 8-5 SU/9-4 ATS in his first 13 games back. When he and Stephen Curry are on the floor they outscore opponents by 4.5 points every 100 possessions. They are also going to get Chris Paul back soon after the break, and they have the sixth-easiest remaining strength of schedule. Those who bet on this will likely have to sweat out a Play-In game, but Golden State will be the best team in the Play-In Tournament without question and a path to the postseason is worth investing in.

### Luka Doncic To Win MVP (13-1)

If there was an MVP candidate worth investing in at this point of the season it would be Doncic. He has the counting stats — 34.2 points, 8.8 rebounds and 9.5 assists per game — and in the most recent straw poll from ESPN reporter Tim Bontemps he closed the gap on Giannis Antetokounmpo. In fact, he got one more first place vote than Antetokounmpo did. The fifth seed is the likely ceiling for Dallas, but should it achieve that with Doncic continuing to put forward these stat lines it is clear he has a higher probability to win the award than 13-1 would indicate.





Jayson Tatum

# THE EAST AT THE BREAK

by Zachary Cohen

## CONTENDERS

### Boston Celtics

The Celtics have been the best team in the league all year. They're first in the league in adjusted offensive rating (120.9) and third in adjusted defensive rating (111.4), according to Dunks & Threes. They're also first in adjusted net rating (+9.6) by a wide margin. Not many teams possess the talent and depth that Boston does, and it's nice having a two-way star like Jayson Tatum setting the tone for the rest of the roster. This is a team that plays selfless basketball on both ends of the floor, and everybody is bought in. Also, with Jrue Holiday and Derrick White, the Celtics have the best duo in the league as far as perimeter defense goes. That's huge considering the talent at the guard position in today's NBA.



Boston also did very well at the trade deadline by acquiring big man Xavier Tillman. In an ideal world, the Celtics won't have to play him very much in the postseason. But he's a very good defender (+4.0 Defensive EPM, 99th percentile) and does some nice things offensively. He's a good insurance plan if Kristaps Porzingis or Al Horford go down. That's very possible given Porzingis' injury history and Horford's age.

The only thing to worry about with Boston is the team's shot diet. The Celtics shoot more of their shots from behind the 3-point line than anyone (43.8%). They're also a bottom-five team in shot frequency at the rim (28.6%). That has caught up to Boston in the past. If the jumpers aren't falling, how will the Celtics adjust? They very well could struggle to do so. That's why I see some value in backing other Eastern Conference teams on the futures market.



### Milwaukee Bucks

The Bucks have had their issues this season, which is why they moved on from head coach Adrian Griffin and brought in Doc Rivers. This team has been a disaster on the defensive end, giving up 117.3 points per 100 possessions (according to Cleaning The Glass). That number has them in the bottom half of the league. That was somewhat expected in going from Holiday, a world-class defender, to Damian Lillard. However, the Bucks have played like an above-average defense in spurts. If they can flirt with doing that in the playoffs, they have what it takes to win a title. That's the benefit of having Lillard and Giannis Antetokounmpo.

When things get tough, Milwaukee will have the option of spamming the pick-and-roll game with two of the league's best offensive players. The chemistry hasn't quite been there for Lillard and Antetokounmpo, but they're too good not to figure it out. And Antetokounmpo will likely get over not wanting to set screens in the playoffs. That will be a nightmare for opposing defenses, especially with Khris Middleton playing in space on the other side of the floor — and a handful of 3-point shooters to make defenses pay for overplaying anywhere. The Bucks are fifth in the NBA in made 3s per game (14.3).

Look for Milwaukee to turn things up a bit in the postseason, when everybody plays a little harder on defense and talent tends to win out on offense. However, the Bucks will probably be a good team to fade the remainder of the year. They're just 21-34 ATS this season, making them one of the worst ATS teams in basketball.



## Philadelphia 76ers

The Sixers are a bit of a question mark moving forward, as it's unclear when Joel Embiid and his league-leading 35.3 points per game will return from knee surgery. When Embiid is healthy, the Sixers are a top-tier team in the Eastern Conference. The combination of Embiid and Tyrese Maxey is as good as any in basketball, and Nick Nurse knows how to push the right buttons with the rest of the pieces on this roster. However, it's a little hard to trust Philadelphia the rest of the way.

Even if Embiid does return, it's not clear whether or not he'll be able to play at the level he did earlier this season. Embiid is first in the league in Estimated Plus-Minus (+10.3), and he is in the 99th percentile when it comes to both offensive and defensive efficiency. He would have been the unquestioned MVP if he met the minimum game requirement. But if Embiid isn't moving well, or is forced to play limited minutes, that significantly caps the upside of this Sixers team. It's all a bit of a downer for a fun team that added Buddy Hield at the deadline.

Philadelphia isn't a lost cause because it is possible Embiid comes back and looks like the superstar he is. It's just hard to advise betting on them with all this uncertainty.



## Cleveland Cavaliers

I wrote about the Cavaliers as a bet to win the NBA title a few weeks ago. I'm not sure I actually believe Cleveland has what it takes to make the NBA Finals, but I do think the Cavaliers are priced incorrectly right now. Cleveland is fourth in the NBA in adjusted net rating (+5.0) this year. With that in mind, I don't see as big of a gap between the top teams in this conference and the Cavaliers. So, I think it's worth playing them on the futures market, even if the main goal is to find an opportunity to hedge for a small guaranteed profit later in the playoffs.

It's just hard to ignore how good this Cleveland team is defensively. The Cavaliers are second in the NBA in adjusted defensive rating (111.0), and they also added quite a bit of outside shooting to their roster in the offseason. They're making nearly two more 3s per game this year than they did in 2022-23. That will take a lot of pressure off Donovan Mitchell, who was fighting an uphill battle against a good New York Knicks defense in the first round last year. Teams can no longer afford to blindly send extra help his way, and that will make Cleveland a significantly tougher out.

This is also a good team to bet on a nightly basis, as the Cavaliers play hard every night. They're 29-22-2 ATS on the season, giving them a top-five covering rate in the league.

## New York Knicks

The Knicks are probably a piece away from being a legitimate title contender, but you can't rule out the possibility of this team beating anybody in the playoffs. That means a lengthy postseason run isn't off the table. As long as OG Anunoby and Julius Randle don't suffer injury setbacks, nobody will want to face this team. The Knicks are fully capable of playing elite-level defense (they're 10th in adjusted defensive rating), with Anunoby's superb defense on the wing being a big part of that. The Knicks also have the offensive firepower required to efficiently score in a half-court setting.

Jalen Brunson (27.6 PPG, 7th in Offensive EPM) has been unstoppable all year long, Randle is a tough cover in space and the rest of the rotation is full of role players that play their parts to perfection. New York also added a much-needed scoring punch at the deadline, bringing in Bojan Bogdanovic and Alec Burks. The Knicks needed a little more juice on that end, and they addressed it in a big way. It's also possible that Mitchell Robinson will return for the playoffs, giving the Knicks a big-time offensive rebounder and a good positional defender. Tom Thibodeau also deserves some flowers. As long as he doesn't go up against Erik Spoelstra, the Knicks are in good shape from an Xs and Os standpoint.

The Knicks are also similar to the Cavaliers in that they're generally a trustworthy ATS team. They're 30-24-1 ATS on the year. They also go Under more often than not, as they have failed to reach the number 31 times this season.



Jalen Brunson



## OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

### Orlando Magic

The Magic have been the most profitable ATS bet in the NBA this season. With their 118-100 win over the Knicks before the break, they moved to 34-19-2 ATS. Given the way they play, they'll likely continue to be a good side bet moving forward — especially as they try to avoid the Play-In Tournament. Orlando is a top-five team when it comes to adjusted defensive rating (112.4), and the Magic are loaded with young talent. That generally means they have the fresh legs required to take advantage of teams that don't take the regular season seriously.

The problem with the Magic is that they don't take enough 3s, with the outside shot accounting for less than a third of their overall shot attempts. It's hard to win that way in today's NBA, and Orlando also lacks consistent offensive production in the backcourt. The Magic will continue to address the guard position in the draft and free agency until that changes. Jalen Suggs is an obvious keeper, but they need another high-level guard that can shoot the basketball.

It wouldn't be shocking if Orlando gives somebody a run for their money in the first round, or even finds a way to pull off an upset. But the Magic don't have the talent to make an extended run right now.



### Indiana Pacers

The Pacers are one of the most fun teams in the league, as they are led by the ultra talented Tyrese Haliburton (21.8 PPG, 11.7 APG, 1st in Offensive EPM). The 23-year-old is one of the best pick-and-roll guards in basketball, and he is the engine behind a team that is third in the league in adjusted offensive rating (119.8) and second in pace of play. This Indiana squad really gets up and down the floor, which is why the team has been involved in mostly Overs (34-23) this season. The Pacers also made a win-now move in trading for Pascal Siakam, a two-time NBA All-Star and 2022 All-NBA Third Teamer.

The problem with the Pacers is that they tend to struggle when teams can throw extra bodies at Haliburton and really force him into uncomfortable situations. So, their high-octane offense is a little unreliable when they face good defenses. They're also one of the five worst defensive teams in the league in adjusted defensive rating (119.5), and they're weakest at the point of attack. That's not exactly a winning style of basketball, making this a hard team to trust in the postseason. But Indiana is building something special and contention isn't too far away.



### Miami Heat

The Heat are a very hard team to write off, as we saw in last year's run to the NBA Finals. Everybody counted Miami out before the playoffs started, but the team continued to scratch and claw its way to victory — and some uncharacteristically hot 3-point shooting definitely helped. As long as the Heat are a good defensive team and have Erik Spoelstra walking the sidelines, they're a threat to win a playoff series. But it feels like Miami is a piece short, especially on the offensive end. They're just 22nd in the league in adjusted offensive rating (113.6). And while they're good defensively, it's hard to stack wins when you're having trouble scoring.

Miami is a team that nobody wants to draw. But it'd be shocking if the Heat make another run like last year. And the deadline acquisition of Terry Rozier doesn't feel like enough to save them.



## THE REST

### Chicago Bulls

The Bulls are one of the feistier teams in the league, making them a good ATS bet (28-25-2 ATS) on most nights. They're taking the regular season very seriously and Coby White's play has been a revelation this year. But Chicago lacks the talent required to really put a scare in most playoff teams. That makes them a bit of a non-factor in the postseason, which isn't surprising considering Zach LaVine (and his \$40 million per year) is sidelined.

### Atlanta Hawks

The Hawks are a top-10 team when it comes to adjusted offensive rating (118.0), and Trae Young has looked like a top-20 player for most of this season. However, this Atlanta team really lacks depth, and the team is miserable defensively (29th in adjusted defensive rating). Perhaps the Hawks will win a game or two if they do end up in the playoffs, but it's hard to see them doing anything else. These guys just don't fit together.

### Brooklyn Nets

Outside of being a weirdly good team when it comes to the first quarter of home games (22-7-1 ATS), there's not much to write home about with Brooklyn. This Nets team is facing an uphill battle in terms of making the Play-In Tournament, and they're not a trustworthy bet on a night-by-night basis.

### Toronto Raptors

The Raptors are another team that will likely miss out on the Play-In Tournament, and they're a team to fade moving forward —

especially on the road. The Raptors are also a team to target when it comes to team totals. Toronto was a defensive-minded team earlier in the year, but the group is miserable on that end now. Opponents should put up big numbers against them.

### Detroit Pistons

The Pistons have been one of the punchlines of the NBA season, but they're actually a decent ATS team (26-26-1) and made win-now moves at the deadline. They could end up being a profitable team to bet on down the stretch, as they're much more competitive than the public perceives them to be.

### Washington Wizards

There's not much to say when it comes to the Wizards. They're not as competitive as other bottom dwellers right now, so they're a harder team to gauge when it comes to sides. But their miserable defense and fast pace of play tends to inflate their totals. That has led to Unders coming in regularly over the last two months. The Under is 28-26 in Wizards games this year.

### Charlotte Hornets

The Hornets are right near the bottom of the league in both adjusted offensive and defensive rating. They're absolutely pitiful at the moment, but they could be a good team to target with totals. Charlotte has been getting lit up regularly over the last couple of weeks, and the Hornets have some fun offensive players now. So, Overs might be the way to go with this bunch.



# THE WEST

## AT THE BREAK

by Jonathan Von Tobel

### CONTENDERS

#### Minnesota Timberwolves

Minnesota comes out of the All-Star break as the top seed in the Western Conference due to its incredible defense. The Timberwolves lead the NBA in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (108.8), and in halfcourt settings they allow the fewest points per 100 plays (92.2). Rudy Gobert is the massive odds-on favorite (-650) to win Defensive Player of the Year for a reason, but he is hardly the only great defender for this team. Anthony Edwards and Jaden McDaniels are elite on-ball defenders, and Mike Conley is a smart defensive guard that is hardly ever out of position. This team's size and length make them a challenge to any opponent in the postseason, and they are a legit threat to win the conference because of it.



If anything holds Minnesota back it would be its offense. The team averages only 116.9 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time on offense. That is good for 15th in the league at the All-Star break. As elite as their halfcourt defense is, the Timberwolves need help in the same situation on offense. They average only 100.8 points per 100 plays against set defenses. It is why the addition of Monte Morris at the deadline is so big for this team. They desperately needed another shot creator, and Morris gives that to them. He will not fix this offense by any means though. It is on the starting group to find a flow on that end of the floor, or risk being eliminated early.

Immaturity could derail this train as well. Minnesota has not handled expectations well with this current group, and that is represented by its 18-18-3 ATS record as a favorite. This team thrives as an underdog - 10-5 ATS this season - but those situations will be few and far between after the break. This is not a team that is worth fading or following once play resumes, but it is a team that can have success in the postseason. If you haven't already, consider investing in Minnesota to represent the Western Conference in the NBA Finals.

#### Denver Nuggets

The reigning champions are still every bit as dangerous as they were last season, especially if they get homecourt advantage in the Western Conference again. Their starting five - Jamal Murray, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Michael Porter Jr., Aaron Gordon and Nikola Jokic - has played the most possessions of any lineup in the league and is outscoring opponents by 12.4 points every 100 possessions. Jokic continues to dominate the league as well. He is the odds-on favorite to win MVP (-165) and he is averaging 26.1 points, 12.0 rebounds and 8.9 assists at the break on 57.7% shooting from the floor. As long as those five are intact this group is a threat to repeat as NBA Finals champions.

If there is an issue to nitpick with Denver it would be its bench. Last season, the Nuggets had Bruce Brown and Jeff Green making up their bench rotation. This season, Reggie Jackson (10.9 PPG) and Christian Braun (7.0 PPG) are their leading scorers off the bench. When Jokic is off the floor Denver goes from a +9.6 net rating to a -11.3 net rating, according to Cleaning The Glass. They do use Gordon at center at times and those lineups have a +13.5 net rating, so it is likely that is what bettors see once the postseason comes around. However, you do need some bench production to win the NBA Finals, and what we have seen from the Nuggets' bench leaves a lot to be desired at times. It could also be what keeps them from being a back-to-back champion.

Denver has also been a very poor team to back at the window, and that will likely be the case as we move into the homestretch of the season. The Nuggets are among the highest rated teams in the league, and that leads to some bloated point spreads. It is why they are 23-31-1 ATS on the season and just 13-13 ATS at home despite a 21-5 SU record. This is not a team worth backing night to night, and the value on them to win the Finals has been sucked dry. But, they are still one of the top contenders in the Western Conference.

Anthony Edwards







### Los Angeles Clippers

There has been no better team since the beginning of December than the Los Angeles Clippers. Over its last 35 games Los Angeles is 28-7 SU/22-13 ATS with the best offensive rating in non-garbage time (125.3), according to Cleaning The Glass. The Clippers are among the deepest teams in the NBA, but there is no question that the play of Kawhi Leonard is the driving force behind this success. Over the same span Leonard is averaging 25.4 points, 6.3 rebounds and 4.1 assists per game on 55.9% shooting from the floor and 49.3% on 3-point attempts. His play has thrust him into contention for MVP, and the Clippers into the upper echelon of teams in the Western Conference.

Leonard is hardly alone with his spectacular play, and that is what makes Los Angeles so dangerous. James Harden has played every game since being acquired by the Clippers, is averaging 17.5 points and 8.4 assists and he improves their net rating by 15.7 points every 100 possessions on the floor. Paul George has a similarly incredible efficiency differential (+9.7) while averaging 22.5 points and 5.3 rebounds per game. The trio of Leonard, Harden and George outscore opponents by 12.3 points every 100 possessions on the floor together, and their starting lineup is among the most efficient in the NBA.

The obvious disclaimer for Los Angeles is health, but that has not been an issue to this point of the season. Leonard missed the last game prior to the All-Star break with an adductor strain, but had missed just four games before that. George has missed only three games all season. The Clippers' lack of size could do them in as well, as evidenced by a loss to Minnesota prior to the break. However, this team has depth at almost every position, and could have the best player on the floor in almost any series, save for one with Denver. It's a team worth riding once we return to play.

### Phoenix Suns

Health has been what has held Phoenix back this season, and it threatens to derail the Suns yet again. Bradley Beal left Phoenix's win over Sacramento prior to the break with a hamstring injury, and as of this publication, a timetable for his return has yet to be reported. Beal has played in just 30 games this season. His inability to be available this season is a large reason why the Suns find themselves fighting to stay inside the top six seeds of the Western Conference. The potential of what this team can be is scary though, and the league has seen it.

Phoenix went 18-7 SU/13-11-1 ATS in the 25 games prior to the Beal-less win over Detroit before the break. Over those 25 games the Suns were fourth in net rating (+9.0), second in offensive rating (124.6) and ninth in defensive rating (115.6). When Beal is on the floor with Kevin Durant and Devin Booker, Phoenix outscore opponents by 15.4 points per 100 possessions. Their offensive rating in those possessions (130.6) is in the 100th percentile of qualified lineups.

Those figures point to how dangerous Phoenix can be. Among the contenders, this is the team worth investing in the most from a future standpoint. They are 14-1 to win the NBA Finals at DraftKings. That is a price that carries some value, but make sure the injury for Beal is not a serious one that will keep him sidelined for an extended period of time.



Shai Gilgeous-Alexander

### Oklahoma City Thunder

Oklahoma City went into the All-Star break on a small skid, but this team looks like it is the real deal. The Thunder are third in non-garbage time net rating this season (+7.9), and top five in both offensive (120.9) and defensive rating (112.9). At the center of this success is Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, who is the second choice on the oddsboard for MVP at DraftKings (+280). Gilgeous-Alexander is averaging 31.1 points, 5.5 rebounds and 6.5 assists per game on 54.6% shooting from the floor. He is also contributing defensively by leading the league in steals (2.2).

Gilgeous-Alexander's success is also part of the downside for Oklahoma City this season. When he is on the floor the Thunder outscore opponents by 10.4 points every 100 possessions. But, in the possessions without Gilgeous-Alexander they only outscore opponents by 1.1 points per 100 possessions. The problem is the offense, which manages just 112.3 points per 100 possessions without him on the floor. In a playoff series Oklahoma City could run into issues with good defensive teams which have an adequate defender to put on Gilgeous-Alexander while subsequently taking advantage of the minutes in which he doesn't play.

With all that in mind, this is still going to be one of the best teams to follow at the window once the season resumes. The Thunder are the second-best cover team in the NBA at the break (33-20-1 ATS, 62.3%). At home they are 21-6 SU/18-9 ATS and they are covering by 4.9 points per game. The odds for this team to win the title are too short to invest in at this point – especially with such a glaring weakness when it comes to the non-Shai minutes – but it should treat bettors well at the window the rest of the season.





## OUTSIDE LOOKING IN



### New Orleans Pelicans

One could make the argument that New Orleans is the team that has the best chance of breaking through to the next tier of competitors. They have a dominant player in Zion Williamson (22.4 points, 5.5 rebounds and 4.8 assists) who can take over a series. New Orleans has also been quietly dominant on defense throughout the season. It enters the break seventh in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (114.0) and 10th in halfcourt defensive efficiency (97.6). However, there are some signs that the defense has an expiration date. In fact, some shot metrics paint the picture of some luck on the side of the Pelicans. If that defensive success regresses then an average offense will have a massive load on its shoulders. Still, they have exceeded expectations. The Pelicans are 30-25 ATS on the season and 15-11 ATS at home. They are on pace to go over their pre-flop win total as well. New Orleans will likely start the postseason on the road, but of the teams on the outside looking in it could be the most lethal.

### Sacramento Kings

Sacramento deserves to be here because of the remaining core of a team that made the postseason last year, but it is hard to take them seriously as a title contender because of their defense. The Kings allow 117.9 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time this season, and as a result they have a -0.5 net rating. Their halfcourt defense is particularly awful and allows 102.8 points per 100 plays. That is not going to win a championship, and they did nothing to address it at the deadline. Last season, Sacramento balanced their poor defense with an offense that led the league in efficiency. This season, they are just 14th in offensive efficiency. There is nothing about the Kings that says they are a championship contender this season. Sacramento is also one of the most overvalued teams at home this season, and enter the break 15-9 SU/11-13 ATS at the Golden 1 Center. It might be worth it to continue to play on that angle once play begins again.



### Dallas Mavericks

The upside of Dallas is absolutely real. When Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving are on the floor together the Mavericks outscore opponents by 8.9 points every 100 possessions. That duo also ranks in the 93rd percentile of qualified lineups in offensive rating (122.6). On any given night they can match up with any team and have offensive success. However, their shortcomings on defense will ultimately be their downfall. Neither Doncic or Irving are above average defenders, and for the season the Mavericks rank 17th in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (117.1). Dallas is also a high-variance team. It takes 41.9% of its shots from beyond the arc, but only 28.3% within four feet of the basket. That style of offense is not conducive to sustained success, and it would be unwise to bank on that success in the big picture. For the rest of the season – as long as both Doncic and Irving are on the floor – this would be a team worth backing with some consistency at the window.

### Golden State Warriors

Of all the teams in this category I believe that Golden State is the only team with true upward mobility. Since Draymond Green's return from suspension, the Warriors are 8-5 SU/9-4 ATS. In those 13 games they outscored opponents by 6.8 points every 100 possessions. The biggest difference was the offense which had a 120.4 offensive rating in those contests. With Green and Steph Curry on the floor Golden State has a +4.5 net rating and a 120.1 offensive rating. Now that Green is available regularly we are starting to see what the Warriors can truly be. This is what is lost in a down season for Golden State. Green missed time due to a suspension. Chris Paul remains out with a left hand injury. Once Paul returns this team will be at full strength for the first time in a long time this season. This team is much better than what their record would indicate. If a better reading this wanted to invest in one longshot from this group it should be Golden State which is 25-1 to win the Western Conference.



### Los Angeles Lakers

To be honest, I do not believe Los Angeles deserves to be in this tier. The Lakers are a subpar offensive team that averages 116.5 points every 100 possessions. They shoot the fewest 3-point attempts per game (30.7) and rank 13th in accuracy (37.0%). Against any of the better teams in the NBA they are at a massive statistical disadvantage, and that will play out in any postseason matchup, should they even get there. This is all despite the fact that LeBron James has played 49 games and Anthony Davis has appeared in 52 contests. Their two best players have appeared in a vast majority of contests, but Los Angeles still finds itself fighting for a bottom Play-In seed as we enter the All-Star break. Players like D'Angelo Russell are in the midst of a hot streak – 23.4 points and 6.9 assists per game over the last 16 games – but that is not sustainable over the long haul. As long as James is playing his team will always have a chance, but the chances for this team are minimal.

## THE REST

### Utah Jazz

Utah is currently on the outside of the Play-In race, and at the trade deadline it sold off three rotation players. Despite that, it is a somewhat highly rated team when compared with some of its contemporaries. It might be worth fading a worse Jazz team when the league returns to action.

### Houston Rockets

Houston is three games out of the Play-In seeds at the break, and they will likely remain on the outside once the season ends. Still, they are fifth in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (113.0) and 28-26 ATS on the season. Given how well they play defensively this should be a winning ATS team on the season and worth backing in the right spots.

### Memphis Grizzlies

Memphis will be the first team to clinch a decision on their preseason win total, but not all is lost. They have an intriguing young core of players that give a good effort, and they are 13th in non-

garbage time defensive efficiency (115.1) at the break. The Grizzlies entered the break on a 8-5 ATS run, which could be a sign of things to come for the rest of the season given how low their market rating has become.

### Portland Trail Blazers

Portland has a litany of veterans playing large roles for a losing team. It is almost certain that players like Malcolm Brogdon, Jerami Grant and Deandre Ayton get extended time off once we get closer to the end of the season, and this could be the best team to fade in the Western Conference once we get to mid-March.

### San Antonio Spurs

The only thing worth watching for San Antonio is Victor Wembanyama. The French rookie heads into the break -600 to win Rookie of the Year, but the Spurs have been careful with his workload. He is averaging less than 30 minutes per game, and he could be a candidate to be shut down early once San Antonio is completely out of the picture.





# NO JOK<sub>(ic)</sub>!

*Nikola favorite of contenders to win MVP*

by Kelley Bydlon

With the All-Star break upon us, it's a great time to take a fresh look at the MVP market, especially now that we know Joel Embiid will not play enough games to qualify for the award. A lot of players have had tremendous seasons thus far, but these are the five guys that deserve your attention at this point in the year.

## TRUE CONTENDER

**Nikola Jokic (-150)**

Jokic is currently the betting favorite, and understandably there will be a lot of MVP bets placed on the best player in the NBA. But can he win this thing for a third time? Tim Bontemps' latest straw poll would indicate that he absolutely can — and is likely to. Personally, I think this will be a tighter race down the stretch than most.

Jokic is currently averaging a whole assist more than he did in his 2021/2022 MVP season, but he also has fewer points and rebounds per game than in that season. Also, his Estimated Plus-Minus and his Estimated Wins are less than Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Giannis Antetokounmpo, and Luka Doncic (according to Dunks & Threes).

Where his Nuggets and where Gilgeous-Alexander's Thunder end up in the standings could ultimately decide this award.



## OTHER TRUE CONTENDERS

### Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (+280)

Gilgeous-Alexander really should have won Most Improved Player last year, and now he's knocking on the door for MVP. What he's doing this year is simply incredible. Gilgeous-Alexander has led an upstart Thunder team to a position where they are battling for the top seed in the Western Conference, and he has the highest EW (Estimated Wins contributed) in the NBA at 14.9. He is also putting up some gaudy individual statistics: 31.1 PPG (3rd in NBA), 54.6 FG%, 36.8 3P%, 5.5 REB, 6.5 AST, 2.2 STL (1st in NBA), and only 2.2 TO.

At +280, I think SGA is a great bet for MVP. I recently bet him at just over +300. The Thunder have the ninth easiest remaining strength of schedule and if they are able to beat out the Nuggets in the standings, he'll have the edge over Jokic. And frankly, if a player with a resume like this is not truly considered, then I guess this award has just gotten to the point where it's Jokic or Embiid every season.

### Giannis Antetokounmpo (+800)

If you've listened to Hardwood Handicappers or A Numbers Game, you've probably heard me mentioning that I like Giannis in this market once or twice...or 117 times. I've bet him multiple times over the past month.

Now, I think you can read into the straw poll a bit and wonder whether or not people truly feel that Jokic is the hands-down MVP right now, or they were just asked to send in a name in early February and decided to pick the easiest choice. I think that's a fair question. I do think for people like me that have been carrying the Giannis flag, you probably have to stand down a bit. There were not many people running to put him first, or even second on their ballot.

Having said all that, I do think there is still a path to Giannis winning the award. Yes, his team is going to have to start winning more games, but if he can help Doc Rivers get this defense turned around just slightly — and the Bucks get back to the No. 2 seed in the East — I think Giannis will have a strong case for MVP. Currently, he is only behind SGA in both EPM and EW. And what if I told you this former MVP winner could finish this season averaging more points and assists than in any season in his career? Is that an MVP ticket you might be interested in? I was.

## STILL IN IT

### Luka Doncic (13-1)

Luka's stats speak for themselves. He's one of the most individually gifted basketball players on the planet. He could realistically finish the season averaging 33+ PPG, 9+ APG, and 9+ RPG, but his team might be battling just to make the playoffs. Luka's awesome and I love watching him every game he plays, but it'll be hard for me to consider a bet on him until his teams find more success.

### Kawhi Leonard (60-1)

It feels like we've been waiting on this for a while now, but Kawhi has this Clippers team looking like the best team in the NBA right now. They are right in the race for the top seed in the Western Conference. Kawhi will likely finish with a 50-40-90 season, and in more games played in a season since 2017. He's been getting bet heavily in this market recently, and I understand why his odds have shortened as much as they have. If he can keep up the stellar play and lead this Clippers team to the top seed in the West, don't be shocked if Kawhi walks away with this award.

Giannis Antetokounmpo

