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- PREVIEWS OF ALL 30 TEAMS
- SEASON-LONG BEST BETS

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**ODDS WITHIN GUIDE
ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

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**TEAM PREVIEWS
BY ZACHARY COHEN**

The 2025-26 NBA season is just about here — and with it comes the start of the Oklahoma City Thunder's title defense, a full season of Luka Doncic with the Los Angeles Lakers, the beginning of the Kevin Durant era in Houston, and a year in which several teams will be shorthanded due to Achilles injuries.

You'll find all of it — and much more — in the VSiN NBA Betting Guide.

Last year's guide delivered winning futures and sharp nuggets, and we're determined to help you have another profitable season. Keep reading for:

- Best bets and futures from VSiN hosts and analysts
- Title picks and award-betting insights from Jonathan Von Tobel
- Team previews and win total predictions for all 30 teams
- Trends and Power Ratings from analytics guru Steve Makinen
- Strategies for alternate win totals, player props, and live betting

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We hope this guide gets you as excited as we are for the upcoming season. Dive into the analysis, and make sure to visit VSiN.com daily for best bets, player props (including our new Opta AI Player Projections), and proprietary betting systems.

And if you're a hoops junkie, don't go far — our VSiN College Basketball Betting Guide drops October 23! With all of this preseason coverage, plus everything we're already doing for college football and the NFL, there's never been a better time to be a VSiN subscriber.

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WIRE-TO-WIRE

THREE TEAMS TO INVEST IN AT THEIR POTENTIALLY BEST ODDS

By Jonathan Von Tobel

It's rare to see a wire-to-wire winner in any sport, but in the NBA that has become a norm in recent seasons.

The previous two NBA Finals champions – Oklahoma City and Boston – never saw their odds dip below their preseason expectations. If you wanted to invest in either to win the title, the best time to do it was prior to the season beginning.

So, if you're looking to add futures on teams before the season begins, what should you look for?

Teams which you believe will be candidates to exceed expectations is an obvious choice. If a team can consistently play above the level the market sets for it – going Over a win total for example – its spot on the futures board will likely not dip below preseason expectations.

Potential growth is another as well. If there is a young team – I have one in this piece we will discuss shortly – you can get in front of, that is a beauty. The market might be slow to adjust, but when it does the value on a preseason ticket in your pocket could be immense.

So with that, let's take a look at three teams which I believe can exceed those expectations and are worth investing in before the season begins.

DENVER NUGGETS (+750)

There really is no need to explain Nikola Jokic at this point in his career, but just in case you're new here, he is the best player in the world.

A three-time MVP, Jokic is coming off a career-year. He averaged career-highs in scoring (29.6), rebounding (12.7), assists (10.2), and three-point percentage (41.7%). When he was on the floor, the Nuggets outscored opponents by 11.5 points every 100 possessions. Jokic has also shown a sturdiness which has led him to playing at least 70 games in every season of his career but one. Denver will always be elite with the Serbian center without question, but the team around him might be the most complete group he's played with.

The Nuggets made a great acquisition in the offseason when they flipped Michael Porter Jr. for Cameron Johnson. Johnson fills a massive need at small forward. Porter was a fine catch-and-shoot threat, but he offered little more than that. Johnson can not only hit those shots – he was a 40.3% catch-and-shoot three-point shooter last season – but he provides the Nuggets with a guy that can make defenses pay for aggressive closeouts. He is not a lockdown wing defender by any stretch of the imagination, but he can at least fight on that end of the floor as well.

Denver did not stop there either. The team brought in Jonas Valanciunas to play the backup center spot, as well as more backcourt support in Bruce Brown and Tim Hardaway Jr.

This isn't a perfect team. Backup guard behind Jamal Murray is a big question when you evaluate the roster. Unlike Jokic, Murray tends to miss time. He has not played more than 70 games since his third season and in three of his last six seasons he played fewer than 60 contests. He missed one season entirely in that same span. If he misses time again, it could hurt the Nuggets' offense.

Despite that, this team is worth investing in now.

Denver has the easiest strength of schedule according to Positive Residual, which factors in miles traveled, rest, and elevation into its ratings. It also has one of the strongest homecourts in the league. Since 2022, the team has won 75.7% of its home games.

The Nuggets have the best player in the game, an improved roster, and a strong homecourt. This should be a team at the top of the standings all season long. A top seed will be within reach. It also pushed Oklahoma City to seven games despite injuries to key players like Aaron Gordon last season.

This group's odds will only get shorter as the season goes along.

NEW YORK KNICKS (10-1)

If not now, when?

The reverberations of a trio of Achilles injuries in the postseason have kicked the door open for the New York Knicks. Indiana and Boston are essentially on gap years, as both Tyrese Haliburton and Jayson Tatum recover. Milwaukee might have signed Myles Turner in the offseason, but gone are Damian Lillard and Brook Lopez. Cleveland stands in the way, but even the Cavaliers have felt the sting of the surgical blade with both Darius Garland and Max Strus on the mend from offseason procedures.

New York doesn't look dramatically different from a season ago, but the additions made at the fringes are near-perfect fits for what the team lacked.

Jordan Clarkson – finally free from the clutches of the Utah Jazz – gives the Knicks a much-needed scoring presence off the bench. New York averaged only 21.7 bench points per game in the regular season, dead-last in the league. Clarkson averaged 17.8 points on 42.4% shooting from the floor in a Jazz uniform. He won Sixth Man of the Year once and finished fourth in voting another year. He is exactly what the Knicks needed.

New York bolstered its bench further with the addition of Guerschon Yabusele. "Le Bear" had a resurgent 2024-2025 season. He averaged 11.0 points and 5.6 rebounds on 50.1% shooting from the floor for Philadelphia. If he can maintain that production, the Knicks' frontcourt depth will be greatly improved.

New leadership in the Big Apple should also help unlock this team's potential.

Mike Brown plans to be more mindful of players' minutes throughout the season. He also wants a Knicks team which finished 27th in three-point frequency (35.1%) to shoot more from beyond the arc. Both changes should help maximize what this team can achieve this season.

New York was already one of the best teams in its conference. It has won multiple series over the last three seasons and fell short in the Eastern Conference Finals a season ago. With so many foes in the East dealing with injuries to key pieces, this has the makings of a strong season for the Knickerbockers.

SAN ANTONIO SPURS (+6500)

I always like to have a longshot heading into a season, and this one has the strongest upside.

Victor Wembanyama's season was limited to just 46 games last season due to a blood clot in his shoulder. However, the second-year center was in the midst of a monster year that saw him averaging 24.3 points, 11.0 rebounds, 3.7 assists, and 3.8 blocks per game on 47.6% shooting. Wembanyama is odds-on favorite to win Defensive Player of the Year, and should finally take that award home if he is healthy this season.

The defensive potential with the French big-man on the floor is unreal, but it is not due solely to his presence. Stephon Castle – a second-year guard – was brilliant in a freshman campaign that saw him earn both Rookie of the Year and All-Rookie honors.

When Castle and Wembanyama shared the floor, San Antonio allowed just 110.9 points per 100 possessions. They ranked in the 66th percentile in opponent effective field goal percentage (53.8%) in non-garbage time. With Castle going into his second season and Wembanyama healthy, this duo should be even more improved on that end of the floor.

De'Aaron Fox will miss the start of the season with a hamstring injury, but that should not keep him sidelined deep into the season. It also paves the way for second overall pick Dylan Harper to get some more work, should he be fully recovered from a surgical procedure on his hand in time.

This is a longshot for a reason. The Spurs are young in key areas without proper experience, and the veterans of import they do have – Fox and Harrison Barnes – are flawed. However, they have a truly special talent in Wembanyama, who could put forth an MVP-caliber season. If the young pieces like Castle take a step forward and rookies like Harper or fellow first-round pick Carter Bryant hit, this could be a surprise team in the Western Conference.

VSIN NBA BEST BETS

KELLEY BYDLON

HAWKS OVER 46.5 WINS (-120)

It was another meh season from the Hawks a year ago. A 40-42 regular season, a loss in the Play-In Tournament, and a lot of rumblings about what the future of Trae Young and this roster might look like. And then the Hawks went out and had one of the most exciting offseasons in the NBA. Not only are Trae and Dyson Daniels back, but I'm excited to see a healthy Jalen Johnson playing again — and to see what the impact of a bunch of big-time additions from the outside can do for the ceiling of this group. Kristaps Porzingis, Nickeil Alexander-Walker, and Luke Kennard all bring a ton of talent and experience to town.

Daniels was the breakout star last year on defense, and adding Porzingis and Alexander-Walker should help solidify the Hawks' main weakness of the past several years. I am a buyer on Atlanta in a weak Eastern Conference. I expect only the Knicks and Cavaliers to have better regular seasons than the Hawks. And who knows where they finish if there are injuries to one or both of those teams?

I am in on Atlanta to win the Eastern Conference, but at a better number than is available now. And I still like the win total Over 46.5, and I would consider some alts there that push 50+. Also, if we think we're talking about one of the better teams in the East, then Young winning MVP (150-1) is worth a sprinkle.

RAPTORS OVER 37.5 WINS (-110)

The Raptors were one of the best defensive teams down the stretch last season, finishing with the fourth-best defensive rating from the trade deadline on. This team returns a lot of the same pieces, and we will finally see Brandon Ingram play some basketball for them this year. The starting lineup looks pretty good on paper with Ingram, Immanuel Quickley, RJ Barrett, Scottie Barnes, and Jakob Poeltl.

The depth will be tested all season, but I think they have different-style weapons off the bench that should help more this year with Gradey Dick, Jamal Shead, and Collin Murray-Boyles. I'm expecting the Raptors to make a leap this season and to be in the playoff conversation in a weaker Eastern Conference. I bet them Over 34.5 wins at open, but I still like it at 37.5, and would consider some alt Overs at 40+ wins.

LAKERS UNDER 48.5 WINS (-105)

With Luka Doncic and LeBron James, nobody is going to want to see this team in the playoffs, but the regular season is a much different story. The Lakers' focus all season will be managing the health of their stars, and the rest of the roster is lacking. I also still don't think this roster is set up perfectly to maximize Luka's strengths. Again, I think this team will be a challenge for anyone in the postseason, but for the regular season, I like a bet on the Under for their win total at 48.5.

BOBBY PORTIS TO WIN SIXTH MAN OF THE YEAR (35-1)

Not many awards bets for me this offseason, but Portis to win Sixth Man of the Year is in the account. This market is often tough to judge before the season gets started, as we are all still learning team rotations, but one situation we can be pretty confident in is Portis' role in Milwaukee. He'll be coming off the bench again, and as usual, a lot will be asked of him.

He finished last season averaging 13.9 PPG and 8.4 RPG. If Portis can just improve a bit on those numbers this season, I expect he'll be in this race for Sixth Man of the Year most of the way, and at 35-1, I think it's a good bet to add now.

NICK WHALEN

WARRIORS UNDER 46.5 WINS (-112)

While the Warriors went over this number last season, it wasn't by much (48 wins), and that was after they got off to a red-hot, 13-4 start. Golden State did go on a run after adding Jimmy Butler, but he's now 36 years old and hasn't played more than 65 games in any season since 2016-17. Health concerns and age is really what this play comes down to. Stephen Curry will turn 38 in March and shouldn't be counted on for a third consecutive 70-game season. The same goes for Draymond Green, as well as the Warriors' lone real offseason addition, Al Horford.

HEAT OVER 36.5 WINS (-115)

Miami is coming off of a rough season that ended with 37 wins, but I'm still higher-than-market on this roster, headlined by a pair of All-Star-caliber players in Bam Adebayo and Tyler Herro. I liked the offseason addition of Norman Powell, and a full season of Andrew Wiggins should, if nothing else, provide dependability on the wing. Ultimately, 36 wins is a very low bar to clear for an Erik Spoelstra-coached team in what may be an even-weaker-than-usual Eastern Conference. Miami hasn't gone under this number since 2007-08 – the year before Spoelstra was hired. I don't mind playing Miami +150 to make the playoffs, either.

MITCH JOHNSON TO WIN COACH OF THE YEAR (20-1)

In the NBA, like most sports, the Coach of the Year award tends to go to a coach whose team significantly improves its year-over-year win total. Coming off of a 34-48 campaign, the Spurs have to be near the top of that list. Injuries, of course, played a major role in San Antonio finishing 13th in the Western Conference, but that will be an afterthought if the Spurs take a major step forward and win, say, 47 games and cruise over their 44.5 win total. While the depth of the Western Conference is a concern, winning in the high-40s is a real possibility with a roster built around Victor Wembanyama, De'Aaron Fox, Devin Vassell, Stephon Castle, and No. 2 overall pick Dylan Harper. Keep in mind, Fox played only 17 games in a Spurs uniform last season, and only five of those overlapped with Wembanyama. I would also consider betting Darko Rajakovic (25-1) and Rick Carlisle (50-1).

WES REYNOLDS

PISTONS OVER 45.5 WINS (-110)

The 2024-25 Pistons won 44 games, its most since 2016, and made the playoffs for the first time since 2019 before bowing out in a tough six-game series against the Knicks. They were able to have all these accomplishments with Jaden Ivey, the No. 5 overall pick in the 2022 NBA Draft, only playing 30 games before breaking his left fibula and missing the rest of the season. Ivey is now back playing full-contact 5-on-5 with no restrictions.

With Ivey's return, plus Cade Cunningham coming off his first All-Star appearance, Ausar Thompson adding strength, and adding Caris LeVert in free agency, the Pistons backcourt has strong depth. Detroit also acquired LeVert's former Michigan teammate Duncan Robinson via trade to shore up its three-point shooting that struggled in the postseason. He is also an upgrade defensively over his fellow Michigan Tim Hardaway Jr, who signed with Denver in the offseason.

Jalen Duren has turned into a double-double machine over the last two seasons and now looks to have more of a green light to shoot from range which will diversify Detroit's offense even more.

Cleveland will be the rightful favorite in the Central Division, but Detroit looks right for the second spot there. The Pacers certainly take at least a small step back with Tyrese Haliburton out for the season. The Bucks signed Myles Turner away from the aforementioned Pacers, but they are still a bit thin at guard. Meanwhile, the Bulls did not make any moves from a team that finished under. 500 last season.

SEAN GREEN

SIXERS UNDER 42.5 WINS (-115)

This team and this franchise is a complete, unmitigated disaster. Even as a totally biased homer for Philadelphia sports teams, I cannot talk myself into an Over for this Sixers group. Things have reached rock bottom in the Joel Embiid era, and the dreams of him being a franchise player leading the team to a championship have faded away. Paul George is a drain on the roster and the salary cap, and they honestly need to blow this thing up and start over.

They need to start a rebuild around Tyrese Maxey, but it seems like they haven't reached that reality quite yet as an organization. Oh, and a rare bright spot — Jared McCain — just had surgery for a torn ligament from an offseason workout. I'm completely out on the Sixers, and you should be too.

JENSEN LEWIS

CAVALIERS TO WIN NBA TITLE (+800)

My hometown Cavaliers enter the 2025-26 season as the Eastern Conference's most battle-tested squad after a franchise-best 64 regular-season wins last year, but their second-round playoff exit to the Pacers exposed vulnerabilities in health and adaptability. They're poised for redemption, but the pressure is on to translate regular-season dominance into a deeper postseason run.

Cleveland's most notable acquisition was guard Lonzo Ball from the Bulls in exchange for Isaac Okoro, adding a defensive specialist who averaged 7.6 points, 3.4 rebounds, and 3.3 assists last season while holding opponents to 40.6% shooting and recording 1.3 steals per game. They also signed center Thomas Bryant (6.5 points, 3.88 rebounds last year) to a one-year deal for backup stability behind Jarrett Allen and forward Larry Nance Jr. (8.5 points, 4.3 rebounds with Atlanta) on another one-year pact, bringing back a familiar face who shot 44.7% from three last season. The foundation — Donovan Mitchell, Darius

Garland, Evan Mobley, and Allen — remains formidable. The team's depth additions address last year's injury toll, potentially allowing better load management for a projected 60+ win pace.

Playoff execution faltered last spring due to injuries and physical mismatches against Indiana, dragging their energy in key games. Garland's post-injury form and Mobley's scoring growth (still under 16 PPG) are question marks, while the bench's scoring was inconsistent. Without stylistic shifts under Kenny Atkinson, they risk another early exit if health issues persist. That being said, the Cavs are a headliner to be among the Beasts of the East.

MAGIC TO WIN NBA TITLE (22-1)

Is the Magic really back in the East? Dark-horse status is engaged in a wide-open conference, fresh off a youth-driven surge (No. 2 in defensive rating last year) but plagued by injuries and offensive woes (27th-ranked). They made a blockbuster trade, acquiring Desmond Bane from Memphis for Cole Anthony, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, and future picks, adding a 41% career three-point shooter to help fix their league-worst mark (31.8% on 11.2 makes). Free-agent PG Tyus Jones also joins the club for elite facilitation.

Their youthful core is ready for aggressive expansion: Paolo Banchero (25.9 PPG career-best) and Franz Wagner (24.2 PPG), paired with All-Defensive guard Jalen Suggs, Bane's scoring (entering his prime at 27), and Jones' steadiness, elevate a backcourt that ranked last in threes. If healthy (Banchero 46 games, Wagner 60, Suggs 35 last year), they look like a top-4 lock in the East.

Their biggest question: can Bane catalyze the young stars? A healthy run projects 50+ wins and Eastern Conference Finals capability in an "open" East.

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA TO WIN MVP (18-1)

Wembanyama enters his third NBA season as one of the most captivating MVP candidates. The 21-year-old French phenom finished fifth in DPOY voting last year despite playing just 46 games, while his MVP case hinges on a full, dominant campaign that could exploit voter fatigue with established stars like Nikola Jokic and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander.

The Spurs have been focused on backcourt elevation around Wembanyama, acquiring point guard De'Aaron Fox in a trade with Sacramento for a package including young prospects and picks. Fox, a clutch scorer (23.7 PPG last season), should help alleviate Wemby's offensive burden. They also drafted Dylan Harper (No. 2 overall), while Stephon Castle (last year's ROY) returns for continuity. With Gregg Popovich retiring, 38-year-old assistant Mitch Johnson steps in as head coach, bringing fresh offensive schemes that emphasize spacing for Wemby's range. Health-wise, Wembanyama is fully cleared after a shoulder blood clot sidelined him for 36 games last year.

Wembanyama's 7'3" frame paired with guard skills creates matchup nightmares: he's a rim-protecting force (3.6 BPG last year, leading the league despite limited games) who stretches defenses with elite volume from deep (8.8 attempts per game at 35.2% in 2024-25, up from 32.5% as a rookie). His scoring efficiency and rebounding prowess (11.0 RPG) make him a two-way unicorn, and Fox's presence should unlock more transition opportunities, potentially pushing his assist numbers toward 4.0 APG.

Injury durability remains the biggest red flag, and any recurrence could derail his narrative. However, leading a surging Spurs team to the playoffs while posting video-game stats would force MVP voters to overlook the usual suspects — making his "next big thing" aura too good to refuse.

LUKA DONCIC REGULAR SEASON PPG LEADER (+800)

Luka Doncic enters the 2025-26 season as one of the league's volume monsters, with elite creation skills, now transplanted to a Lakers squad desperate for a post-LeBron revival. His trade to Los Angeles in February 2025, in exchange for Anthony Davis, Max Christie, and draft picks, reshaped both franchises and amplified his scoring ceiling. At 26 years old, Doncic's blend of size, vision, and shot-making positions him as a legitimate threat to reclaim the scoring title he won in 2023-24 (33.9 PPG), especially with the Lakers' offense now orbiting him alongside a 41-year-old LeBron James.

Doncic's 2024-25 campaign with Dallas (pre-trade) was a tale of two halves: explosive early, then hampered by a nagging ankle sprain that limited him to 65 games. He averaged 28.2 points, 8.2 rebounds, and 7.7 assists per game, a slight dip from his scoring title year but still elite for a primary ball-handler. His usage rate hovered around 35.4%, underscoring his role as the Mavericks' offensive engine, though efficiency took a minor hit with a true shooting percentage of approximately 59% (down from 61% in 2023-24). Post-trade to the Lakers, he adapted seamlessly in 32 games, boosting his scoring to 31.0 PPG while maintaining a 35.6% three-point clip.

Doncic's path to the top is straightforward: unmatched volume (35%+ USG%) in an offense tailored to his step-back threes and drives, paired with LeBron's gravity drawing help. He's finished top-3 in scoring three straight eligible seasons and the trade eliminates Kyrie Irving's ball-sharing. Risks include injury recurrence and turnovers (4.3 per game last year), but at +800, he's undervalued (implied probability ~11%), yet his true odds sit closer to 20% in a weak East-heavy conference schedule. If he sustains 31+ PPG efficiency, he's my favorite over Shai.

TYRESE MAXEY REGULAR SEASON PPG LEADER (100-1)

Maxey, now 25, has evolved from Philly's "spark plug" to its unquestioned alpha, leading the 76ers in scoring and assists last season en route to an All-Star nod. His blistering speed and off-ball movement make him a nightmare in transition and spot-ups, but 2024-25 exposed vulnerabilities in half-court creation amid injuries to Joel Embiid and Paul George.

Maxey erupted for 26.3 PPG and 6.1 APG over 70 games, a career high fueled by a 30.1% usage rate as Philly's primary guard. However, shooting dipped to 43.7% FG and a dismal 33.7% from three, his worst marks since Year 1, largely due to a fractured finger that altered his mechanics midseason. He thrived in bursts, dropping 50+ three times, but assist numbers held steady despite the chaos.

Maxey's trajectory screams 28-30 PPG: a rebound to 38%+ from three (career 37.5%) unlocks elite efficiency on 12+ attempts. He's exploded

for 40+ in Philly's fastest lineups and with George healthy, his usage could hit 32% without the 2024-25 chaos. The long odds overlook his All-NBA potential in a contract year, making him a dark horse to crack the top 5 if Embiid stays upright. High-risk, high-reward: bet on the kid who just became the face of the franchise.

TYLER SHOEMAKER

CAVALIERS OVER 56.5 WINS (-110)

The Cavs retain much of their championship-contending core, including Donovan Mitchell, Evan Mobley, and Darius Garland, and if they can stay healthy, that's as good of a core as there is in the East. The East has far less heavyweight competition than usual, making the Cavs' win total enticing for me at 56.5. A somewhat correlated bet here would be Mitchell to win MVP at 100-1.

DUSTIN SWEDELSON

JORDAN CLARKSON TO WIN SIXTH MAN OF THE YEAR (12-1)

Ten of the past twelve winners of this award have been guards, consistently players who can come off the bench and get buckets. With a wide-open Eastern Conference this year, the spotlight on the Knicks will be even bigger than it usually is. With that, the addition of Jordan Clarkson will get more attention. Clarkson actually won this award back in 2021, when he averaged 18.4 PPG, 2.5 APG, and 4.0 RPG while playing in Utah.

The situation for him to have another big offensive output is set up perfectly. For starters, Mike Brown is expected to lean on his bench more than Tom Thibodeau ever did. Secondly, he will get plenty of offensive looks in a Knicks offense that needs players who can create their own shot when Jalen Brunson is off the floor. When the Knicks go to the full bench unit, Clarkson will be the primary bucket-getter. More importantly, as a player who can get hot, he could see starter minutes if Brown chooses to ride the hot hand when he's feeling it.

HAWKS TO WIN EASTERN CONFERENCE (10-1)

The Eastern Conference is more open than ever this year. Your past two conference champions, Indiana and Boston, will likely not be in the mix. While the Cavaliers and Knicks have what it takes to take the crown, it's not always that simple in the NBA. The regular season and postseason are two completely different seasons and styles of play. Things become more wide open.

With that, I think the Hawks have a chance to make a lot of noise, and the number is a little too long based on how close they are to the top teams. They have a really nice, versatile core with Trae Young, Jalen Johnson, Dyson Daniels (Most Improved Player, second in Defensive Player of the Year), Zaccharie Risacher (second in Rookie of the Year), and Onyeka Okongwu. Johnson was becoming a star prior to his injury last year, averaging 18.9 PPG, 10.0 RPG, and 5.0 APG. Daniels is a defensive superstar, and Trae Young remains Trae Young.

They added much-needed veteran depth in the offseason with Kristaps Porzingis, Nickeil Alexander-Walker, Luke Kennard. These guys not only bring their ability to impact the game physically, but they have also played in a lot of big games in their careers. That experience could be huge for the Hawks. All of the depth is nice, but this season — and this bet — hinges on the health of Porzingis, which felt scary on a human level at times last year. If he can get back to being 80% of what he was over the last few seasons, this team is built for any style of fight.

PAULY HOWARD

HEAT OVER 36.5 WINS (-115)

The Heat won 37 games last year in what was the season from hell! Jimmy Butler was acting up, causing a big distraction. And Miami stunk in close games and still finished with 37+ wins. I love them to do it again.

PELICANS UNDER 30.5 WINS (-110)

Zion Williamson looks great, but do we trust him not to get hurt? I say he does. It happens every year. The Pelicans also have a weak roster around him and made a horrible trade that had everyone who covers the league talking about them for all the wrong reasons.

MATT YOUMANS

HORNETS OVER 25.5 WINS (-115)

When last season ended with a seven-game losing streak and only 19 wins, Charlotte was the third-worst team in the NBA. The Hornets, however, are no longer hopeless. The team aced the draft by taking Duke's Kon Knueppel with the No. 4 overall pick and Creighton center Ryan Kalkbrenner with the fourth pick of the second round. Charlotte also traded for UConn forward Liam McNeeley, who was a late first-round pick. Knueppel and Kalkbrenner carried the Hornets to a 6-0 record and the Summer League championship in Las Vegas. Charlotte used 36 different starting lineups last season, but the roster is now deeper and more talented. The Hornets should approach the 30-win mark if LaMelo Ball, Miles Bridges, and Brandon Miller can avoid injuries. The additions of veterans Collin Sexton, Pat Connaughton, Spencer Dinwiddie, and Mason Plumlee will be key. It's not a playoff team, but it's finally a team worth watching.

HEAT OVER 36.5 WINS (-115)

In Erik Spoelstra's 17 seasons as coach, the Heat have never won fewer than 37 games (last season and the 2014-15 season) and have missed the playoffs only three times. This is expected to be a rebuilding season after Jimmy Butler was shipped to Golden State, but Butler had become a malcontent in Miami and won't be missed that much. Bam Adebayo and Tyler Herro lead a solid core that also includes Nikola Jovic, Davion Mitchell, Norman Powell, and Andrew Wiggins. I like the potential of the Heat frontcourt, and Jaime Jaquez is one of several promising role players. There's a lot for Spoelstra to work with and he can coach up this team.

JONATHAN VON TOBEL

NUGGETS OVER 53.5 WINS (-120)

Denver hit the ball out of the park this offseason by acquiring Cameron Johnson and bolstering its bench with Tim Hardaway Jr., Bruce Brown, and Jonas Valanciunas. Johnson is an improvement over Michael Porter Jr., and the team finally has a center to play behind Nikola Jokic. They also have Jokic. The three-time MVP is coming off a career season, and four of the starting five from last season are back. Positive Residual ranks their schedule as the easiest in the NBA as well. Fifty-four wins or more should be attainable for the Nuggets this season.

HORNETS OVER 25.5 WINS (-115)

Since a 43-win campaign in 2022, I have been chasing the dragon with this Hornets squad. Charlotte has won just 67 games over the last three seasons, and LaMelo Ball has played in just 105 games over that stretch.

This season looks different on paper for the Hornets though. Brandon Miller – after playing in just 27 games last season – is seemingly healthy. The front office added veterans like Pat Connaughton and Spencer Dinwiddie in the offseason. It also acquired Collin Sexton from Utah. It's a much more solid core that can soften the blow of a likely Ball injury, and Miller is an absolute star in the making.

JAZZ UNDER 18.5 WINS (-110)

Utah underwent a massive firesale in the offseason. Jordan Clarkson, John Collins, Johnny Juzang, and Collin Sexton were all either waived or traded. A new crop of veteran players is in Salt Lake City – Kyle Anderson, Kevin Love, Georges Niang, and Jusuf Nurkic – but it is very clear that the keys will be in the hands of the youngsters this season. Rookies Ace Bailey and Walter Clayton will likely have massive roles, and players like Keyonte George and Taylor Hendricks will be allowed to grow and make mistakes. Will Hardy is a great coach, but this is very clearly the worst team in basketball.

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA TO BE NAMED ALL-NBA FIRST TEAM (+220)

Consider this a diet MVP bet on Victor Wembanyama. The French center has been brilliant in his career, and if he can stay healthy the media would love to award him in some form. Before being sidelined with the blood clot in his shoulder, Wembanyama was averaging 24.3 points, 11.0 rebounds, 3.7 assists, 1.1 steals, and 3.8 blocks per game. It's a statline worthy of First Team honors, but he played in just 48 games. If Wemby can stay healthy and continue on his trajectory, he could compete for the MVP, but finishing as the fifth member of the All-NBA First Team seems more likely.

BRANDON MILLER TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (50-1)

Miller was incredible his rookie season and was in the midst of a strong sophomore campaign before a wrist injury derailed it. In 27 games, Miller averaged 21.0 points, 4.9 rebounds, and 3.6 assists on 40.3% shooting from the floor. If he can stay healthy and provide the same scoring while improving his efficiency, he will be a clear candidate for this award. His defense should also provide a boost that others in contention might not have.

ZACHARY COHEN

I wrote up all 30 team previews, giving out O/U predictions for each of them. However, the majority of those are just leans. These are the ones I'm actually taking: Raptors Over 38.5 Wins (-110), Pistons Over 45.5 Wins (-110), Grizzlies Over 39.5 Wins (-110 - 2 units), Spurs Under 44.5 Wins (-106).

I have also given out Knicks Over 52.5 Wins (+100), Warriors Over 47.5 Wins (-105), and Clippers Over 45.5 Wins (-120 - 3 units) at VSiN.com already. Other plays I've posted to the website: Raptors To Win Eastern Conference (75-1 - 0.25 units), Hawks To Win Eastern Conference (90-1 - 0.25 units), and Grizzlies To Win Western Conference (110-1 - 0.25 units).

ACE BAILEY TO WIN ROOKIE OF THE YEAR (15-1)

We nailed Stephon Castle to win Rookie of the Year last year. Why not go for two in a row? This year, Bailey is the pick. The 6-foot-8 wing had an underwhelming freshman season at Rutgers, averaging 17.6 points and 7.2 rebounds per game on 46.0/34.6/69.2 shooting splits. However, it's pretty clear to everyone that his ability to make shots is out of this world. He's a lethal catch-and-shoot player, he's good at pulling up off the bounce, and his length and athleticism serve him well as a cutter and transition player.

Bailey is also going to have a world of opportunity in Utah. The Jazz might have missed out on Cooper Flagg and Dylan Harper, but they still nabbed the No. 2 player in the 2024 ESPN 100. They'll now bank on their strong organizational infrastructure to get the most out of him.

Will Hardy should be able to maximize Bailey right away. His system will present the rookie with spot-up looks from the corners, opportunities to cut to the basket off Lauri Markkanen, and even some chances to run second-side pick-and-rolls with the bigs.

There's a real shot all of it amounts to Bailey averaging 17+ points per game, which should give him a chance. At 15-1 odds, that's all we can ask for.

DARKO RAJAKOVIC TO WIN COACH OF THE YEAR (25-1 - 0.25 UNITS), AND TUOMAS IISALO TO WIN COACH OF THE YEAR (40-1 - 0.25 UNITS)

I think Quin Snyder will end up winning this award, but the value isn't there at +800 odds. Instead, I'm taking fliers on Rajakovic and Iisalo, who are coaching teams that can exceed expectations in a big way.

If the defense Toronto played in the second half of last season is anywhere close to legit, the Raptors could flirt with 45+ wins. They were second in the NBA in raw defensive rating (109.4) after the All-Star break, and that means it isn't out of the realm of possibility that they'll turn in a top-10 season on that end of the floor. Toronto should also be much better offensively with Brandon Ingram entering the picture. Last season, this team was desperate for some added shot-making, and that's exactly what Ingram provides. I'm just not sure the Raptors are all that far from being a top-15 team in both adjusted offensive rating and adjusted defensive rating. In a weakened Eastern Conference, that could be enough for Toronto to win a good amount of games — and that would likely get Rajakovic some positive attention.

Iisalo's situation is a little weirder. It'll be difficult for the Grizzlies to match last year's 48 wins, and winning this award without a year-over-year improvement in the win column could be a challenge. However, Memphis is being left for dead with Desmond Bane now playing for Orlando. The Grizzlies have a win total of only 39.5, and you can find +160 odds for them to make the playoffs. That means this team isn't thought of very highly, giving Iisalo a chance to win people over. Well, I think he will. Bane might be gone, but Memphis essentially replaced him with Ty Jerome, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, and Cedric Coward — a pretty solid trio. Iisalo's system is also designed to get the most out of Ja Morant, so a strong season from the electric guard would reflect well on this Finnish mastermind.

BENNEDICT MATHURIN TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (25-1 - 0.5 UNITS)

Mathurin averaged 16.1 points and 5.3 rebounds per game last season, and he did it in a relatively small role. Rick Carlisle has asked Mathurin to rein things in, as he can be a bit of a ball-stopper and he plays in an offense that demands unselfish play and quick decisions. However, with Haliburton out for the season, Carlisle is going to need to let Mathurin loose. The 23-year-old is a good shooter, an explosive leaper, and a tough isolation player, thanks to his size and strength at his position. He can help prevent a massive slide for Indiana in the adjusted offensive rating (aORTG) rankings. Mathurin has a chance to score 20+ points per game and be the best offensive player on a playoff team. If that's the case, he'll garner some serious consideration in this market.

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The popularity of alternate win total bets has boomed in recent years. With more books offering them —and more options seemingly every year — many bettors will involve them in their preseason futures portfolios. They can be advantageous to bettors simply because of how tough it is for oddsmakers to accurately predict how many wins a team will actually end up with. Things like injuries and trades can drastically impact a season, and of course we get teams that will just far surpass, or fall short, of preseason expectations. For anybody betting win totals in the NBA, alts can be extremely valuable additions before the season begins.

I went back to the five full seasons we've had since COVID and added up how many teams' preseason win totals were off by 3+ games, and how many were off by 5+ games.

As you can see, there are a lot of teams going way Over or way Under their preseason win totals. In the last five seasons, you're talking 70.6% of teams that were 3+ wins better or worse than their win totals, and 50.6% of teams were 5+ wins off.

NBA ALT WIN TOTALS

SEASON	# OF TEAMS WITH WIN TOTALS OFF BY 3+ WINS	# OF TEAMS WITH WIN TOTALS OFF BY 5+ WINS
2024-2025	21	18
2023-2024	23	16
2022-2023	21	17
2021-2022	22	11
2020-2021	19	14

Now, this doesn't mean you should be just blindly betting the extreme alt win total options, but if you have conviction on a season win total bet, you should definitely consider adding an alternate win total bet as well. How much should you put on it? Well, that's up to you.

It's also important to be cautious when betting alt Overs on teams that already have high win totals, or alt Unders with teams with low totals. But those teams living in the mid-range are perfect for these kinds of bets.

Below are some win totals and alt win total bets I'm looking at for this season:
- Hawks Over 46.5 Wins (-120) -> Hawks Over 51.5 Wins (+255)
- Raptors Over 37.5 Wins (-110) -> Raptors 45+ Wins (+650)
- Lakers Under 48.5 Wins (-110 -> Lakers Under 44.5 Wins (+220)

HOW TO APPROACH

NBA AWARDS

BY JONATHAN VON TOBEL

Out of all the markets in any sport, it is awards betting that generates the most conversation by the end of the season. Bettors in the media stump for the player they have a wager on. Others take flyers on guys who are getting hot at the end of the year in the hopes of cashing a longshot.

Regardless of how you approach it, betting on awards is a thrill, and in the NBA there is a litany of awards to throw some cash down on. In this article we go over the history of the main player awards in the Association.

What trends are there? Is there a statistical benchmark that a player needs to meet? How do media members generally approach voting for certain awards? All of those questions are answered here in the hopes of helping you find some winners this season.

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

The criteria for MVP are the most simple of the awards in the NBA. Be the best player on the best team, and more likely than not, you're winning the award. Since the 1982-1983 season, only six times has an MVP winner not been on a team which was at least the second seed in its respective conference. In recent seasons, the media seems to have relaxed its standard when it comes to team success, as four of the last nine MVP winners have been on teams that finished below second, including two winners – Nikola Jokic and Russell Westbrook – who were on teams that finished sixth in their conference.

Scoring is a must for the MVP of any season. Since Kevin Durant won the award in 2014, six winners of the award have averaged 30.1 points or more. Over that span, the average point-per-game mark for an MVP has been 29.2 points per game. Steve Nash (2006 & 2005), Bill Walton (1978), Wes Unseld (1969), and Bill Russell (1961-1963, 1965) are the only winners of the award to average fewer than 20 points per game in a season.

Efficiency has become a defining quality of MVP winners in recent seasons. The last seven winners have shot at least 51.9% from the floor. We've also seen a recent dip in minutes per game in MVP winners. Since Stephen Curry's first MVP in 2015, the average minutes per game mark is 33.8 per contest. Up to that point, the average MVP played 39.7 minutes per contest. In fact, just 10 times in the first 59 seasons the award had been given out an MVP averaged fewer than 37 minutes per game. The last 11 winners have failed to surpass 36 minutes per contest.

Statistics like rebounds or assists seem to be less consistent as indicators, as the average tends to rely on the position of the winner. Prior to Shai Gilgeous-Alexander winning last season, a frontcourt player had won the award six straight seasons. Those winners all grabbed at least 10.8 rebounds per game. From 2004 to 2017, we saw only one true frontcourt player win the award: Dirk Nowitzki. The average rebounds per game mark for an MVP over that stretch dipped to 6.5.

There's no real science to the most popular award. Find a player who will win a ton of games and score a ton of points. You'll have a better shot than most to cash a ticket.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Similar to MVP, scoring tends to predict who will win Rookie of the Year season-to-season.

The average Rookie of the Year campaign sees a player put up 19.1 points, 8.7 rebounds, and 3.9 assists per game. Stephon Castle – last season's winner – was the lowest point-per-game mark (14.7) we have seen for a Rookie of the Year since Malcolm Brogdon in 2017 (10.2). Put another way, since LeBron James won this award in 2004, all but two winners of this award have averaged at least 15 points per game.

Traditional centers have not fared well when it comes to this award either. Yes, both Victor Wembanyama and Karl-Anthony Towns have won Rookie of the Year, but neither is considered a true center. Both are forward-facing bigs that have a perimeter game. The last true center to win the award was Emeka Okafor in 2005.

It's not a surprise to find out that winning does not matter for the Rookie of the Year. It can be a positive note on the resume, but there is hardly a link to team success and this award. Six of the last seven winners have been on teams that won fewer than 40 games.

Efficiency is also not a necessary trait to being named Rookie of the Year. The last seven winners have shot under 50% from the floor, and six of the last eight have shot worse than 33% from beyond the arc. Also, seven Rookie of the Year winners since 2013 have shot under 44% from the floor.

Opportunity – or minutes and games – do really matter for winners of this award. Rookie of the Year does not fall under the minimum 65-game threshold as other awards do, but there is clearly a respect for availability for rookies. Eleven of the last 13 winners have played at least 70 games, and one of the winners that did not reach that mark over that span was Ja Morant in the COVID-shortened season. If we exclude that season, then only three times in the last 25 years has a Rookie of the Year winner played fewer than 70 games in a season.

SIXTH MAN OF THE YEAR

Much like MVP, this award seems to have a very basic criteria which nearly every winner has met: high-volume scorer with little to no impact from poor shooting.

Efficiency is completely irrelevant – the average winner has shot 48.2% from the floor – but it has not damaged the winners of this award.

The last four winners all shot at least 44.7% from the floor and 39.9% from beyond the arc. However, eight of nine winners from 2013-2021 shot 43.5% or worse from the floor. Jordan Clarkson stole this award from his teammate Joe Ingles in 2021 despite shooting 42.5% from the floor compared to Ingles' 48.9% shooting mark. Why? Clarkson averaged 6.3 more points per game.

This has also been a guard-oriented award. Only six forwards or centers have won this award over the last 25 years. Three of those winners – Antawn Jamison, Corliss Williamson, and Rodney Rogers – came before 2005.

Scoring is important for the award, but the floor seems to be lowering for voters. The last three winners – Payton Pritchard, Naz Reid, and Malcolm Brogdon – all averaged less than 15 points per game. That is after a five-year run in which the Sixth Man of the Year averaged at least 18.4 points

per contest. Still, the average winner of this award put up 16.2 points per game.

MOST IMPROVED PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Here we have a very clear parameter for the award set by the media: Second-year players cannot win this award. There have been many voters – Tim Bontemps and Brian Windhorst of ESPN among them – that have been vocal in stating that they will not vote for sophomores. The reasoning is that there is an expectation a player should improve from his first to his second season, and thus is ineligible for the award.

This stipulation is a somewhat recent development, as five players in their second seasons have won the award: Monta Ellis (2007), Gilbert Arenas (2003), Don MacLean (1994), Rony Seikaly (1990), and Alvin Robertson (1986). But, as you can see, the most recent winner was 18 years ago. The current generation of voters seem to have set this boundary, and not even the strongest seasons can break through the newly constructed ceiling.

Look no further than Tyrese Maxey, a winner of this award in 2024. From his first season to his second, he improved his scoring by 9.5 points per game, shot 2.3% better on 6.3 more attempts per game, and started 66 more games. He wasn't even a finalist that year.

It is also unclear whether statistical improvements or an increase in one's status is what motivates voters to give this award away.

Go back to Maxey, but look at the season in which he won the award. He improved his points per game by 5.6 points, averaged 0.8 more rebounds, and 2.7 more assists per game. His efficiency dropped dramatically from the previous season by 3.1%. Yet, he beat out Coby White, who averaged 9.4 more points, 1.6 more rebounds, and 2.3 more assists from the year prior. White was quite literally more improved, but received 19 fewer first-place votes.

Last year, Christian Braun more than doubled his points per game from the year prior, started 73 more games, improved his shooting from 46.0% to 58.0% on 3.3 more attempts per game, and averaged 1.5 more rebounds and 1.5 more assists per game.

He finished fourth on the ballot.

This is honestly the most frustrating award to handicap, as the parameters seem to change year-to-year and voters are vocally ruling certain players out from contention.

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Defense is difficult to gauge in any sport, but in basketball it is especially tricky. No metric – outside of steals and blocks – can point to defensive dominance. Advanced data such as on/off statistics can give us an idea, but even then there is noise. Some of the key defensive statistics are no guarantee a player will win the award.

Last season, Dyson Daniels led the league in steals, finishing ahead of Shai Gilgeous-Alexander who had 98 fewer. Daniels finished second in Defensive Player of the Year voting. Anthony Davis has led the league in blocks per game three times in his career, but finished no higher than third on the ballot in those seasons.

This is also a "reputation" award; whatever that means.

Take Jaren Jackson Jr. as an example. In 2022, Jackson burst onto the scene, playing the most games he had played in his career to that point (78). He led the league in blocks, improved the Grizzlies' defensive rating by 4.8 points every 100 possessions (88th percentile) and was top 10 in both defensive win shares and defensive rating.

Jackson wasn't even a finalist for the award that season, but won it the next year with comparable stats because he had the "reputation" of being a good defender.

Having said that, it is clear that this award is more likely to go to a frontcourt player; specifically a center. Marcus Smart in 2022 was the first perimeter player to win the award since Gary Payton in 1996, and the only reason he won it is because Robert Williams was injured late in the year and the media wanted to give it to a Celtic, as the team led the league in defensive efficiency that season.

LIVE BETTING THE NBA

BY KELLEY BYDLON

With so many markets now available to bettors, there are a lot of different ways to bet a game in any sport. However, live betting should never be overlooked — especially in the NBA. With so many possessions in a game, the NBA provides more opportunities to profitably jump in live on a side or total than any other sport. In fact, for many NBA bettors, including myself, in-game bets can account for the majority of bets you make in a season.

In this article, I go through some things new bettors should know as they begin to get involved in live betting games.

RULES TO LIVE BY

1. IF YOU'RE ENTERING A GAME WITHOUT A PREGAME BET AND ARE LOOKING TO SOLELY FOLLOW A LIVE BETTING STRATEGY YOU HAVE IN MIND, YOU HAVE TO BE OKAY WITH NOT MAKING A SINGLE BET

A lot of bettors force in-game bets when they enter games looking for action.. You should enter each game with a specific strategy in mind and be on the lookout for the opportunities that will offer you a good time/price to jump in live. Simply put, those opportunities won't present themselves in every game. Sometimes games just go a completely different way than you had thought, and that should be fine with you because you don't have a single dollar invested.

2. IF YOU'RE NOT VERY FAMILIAR WITH LIVE BETTING, START OFF BY BETTING THE ABSOLUTE BARE MINIMUM OR NOTHING AT ALL. TRACK HOW THE SPREAD AND TOTAL MOVE THROUGHOUT GAMES

You'll want to get a feel for how spreads and totals move based off of scoring and pace. You'll also get a feel for when the live odds really start to shift away from the pregame numbers. "You'll usually find this doesn't happen until at least the second quarter."

3. WAIT FOR BREAKS IN THE ACTION TO MAKE IN-GAME BETS

Just like any other sport, you really want to wait for a timeout or commercial break to get your bets in. If watching on TV, you'll always be behind what's really happening on the court. Even if the game has hit a time/score and the spread/total you were hoping for, you don't want to risk a bet while the game is still being played. You could be close to a full minute behind the real-time action that's taking place. That's a lifetime in the NBA and before you know it, you might be staring at a very bad bet. Wait for a break, then you can truly evaluate how best to proceed with betting the game.

4. KNOW WHO YOU'RE BETTING AGAINST: A COMPUTER OR A PERSON

Sportsbooks will often utilize technology and computer algorithms to set live odds throughout a game. For a bettor, this is ideal. Those books will have live odds posted throughout most of the game, whereas a sportsbook that is booking the game by hand will usually only post numbers during commercial breaks, and even that may be inconsistent. Betting against a computer will not only give you more opportunities to bet, but those algos might also miss out on accounting for injuries that take place, ejections, players fouling out, etc. Those are all edges a bettor can exploit. Whichever state you're betting in, make sure you're familiar with how each sportsbook handles live markets.

Alright, now that you have all that boring stuff squared away, let's talk about some ways to make some damn money. Below, I go through some of the live betting strategies I utilize regularly.

LIVE BETTING STRATEGIES

1. IT'S ALL ABOUT SHOOTING PERCENTAGES

Even if it's a game you didn't have plans to bet, some opportunities will present themselves that you just can't pass up. Let's say Team A is favored by 5 pregame and is down 12 in the middle of the second quarter. You check the box score and see that Team A is shooting 39% from the field and 18% from three, while Team B is shooting 53% from the field and 47% from three (yes, I'm completely making up numbers for this example). Well, basketball is a game of shooting and runs, and teams can often start out very hot or cold from the field before finding their true average. In the example above, you should expect by the end of the game for Team A's shooting percentages to look much better and Team B's to look much worse, and in the second quarter you could be betting that pregame 5-point-favorite at a much better number.

2. OKAY, IT'S MOSTLY ABOUT THREE-POINT SHOOTING PERCENTAGES

That's the number you should be focused the most on. With how many threes are shot in the NBA today (about 40% of FGA), you can often find teams with drastically different 3PT percentages at different points in a game. However, these percentages usually regress to near a team's average by the end of a game. So, if you see a game with outlier shooting percentages on one side, or both, look to capitalize on it with a bet.

3. GUESS WHAT? THIS WORKS FOR NOT JUST SIDES BUT TOTALS TOO!

Let's say both teams start out shooting poorly from three, or both teams start out shooting way too hot from three. This can lead to easy in-game bets on the Over or the Under.

4. TIMING IS CRUCIAL

Okay, we've discussed what you're looking for when it comes to shooting percentages, but when should you make the bet? A couple of minutes into the game, the odds won't have shifted enough off the pregame numbers, and if you wait until too late into the game, you're not going to give the team you're betting on enough possessions to make up the points you need. If I'm basing my bet mainly just off shooting, I'm usually not getting involved until the second quarter has started, and I'm usually shutting it down by about midway through the third quarter. Again, you have to leave your team enough time.

5. KNOW WHEN STAR PLAYERS TAKE THAT FIRST BREAK

As a season progresses, get to know when star players usually take their first rest in a game. Is it the end of the first quarter? Beginning of the second quarter? These are good to note as the season goes on and will help you make easier decisions on timing your in-game bets.

6. I LIKE A TEAM TONIGHT, BUT MAN, I WISH I WAS GETTING AN EXTRA FEW POINTS OR LAYING A COUPLE LESS!

You'll often say that every week during football season with not much you can do about it. Well, in the NBA that's what I would call a pregame lean that I'm looking to bet live. Let's say you're leaning Team A, and then the game starts off with a flurry of points from Team B. You could wait three minutes into the game, a timeout is called, and boom, all of a sudden you have a live number available to you that you were looking for pregame. Yes, your team has an uphill climb ahead of them, but there are so many more possessions left in the game.

7. WE DON'T ROOT FOR INJURIES, BUT THEY CAN OFTEN LEAD TO BETTING OPPORTUNITIES

We see bettors capitalize on this often in the NBA. Whether it's an injury or a day off for a player, you'll often see big changes in the spread when that injury report comes out and you see a star player taking another game off. The books will look to quickly pull down their numbers or adjust them, and bettors try to beat them to the punch. A similar approach can be taken in-game. If a player is injured, ejected, or fouls out, it might not be reflected in the live odds immediately. This is a major opportunity for bettors.

8. OH SWEET, BEAUTIFUL MIDDLES

These aren't for everybody, and it's not even something I dabble in as much as I used to, but there's nothing quite like the feeling of having +points with both teams and the game falling right in the sweet spot. Of course, this is not something you can do with every game, but maybe you bet a big dog pregame that gets off to an extremely good start that you know they won't be able to maintain. Then come in with a smaller bet on the other side. You never know; you might win both. Of course, this can be applied to totals as well.

9. LIVE PLAYER PROPS

This is something I'm planning to explore more this season. Just like all other live markets, it's one you should study to see how you might be able to profit from it.

PLAYER PROP STRATEGY

BY ZACHARY COHEN

As betting becomes more and more popular, we're seeing a huge increase in the number of people that want to bet specifically on player props. There's something about rooting for individual players that is appealing to a lot of fans, and that's especially true of the NBA. A lot of that has to do with the fact that you're often getting national television games that feature some of the league's superstars. Sportsbooks also happen to offer a lot of bet boosts on those stars, making it easy for props to catch the attention of bettors.

I have been writing about NBA player props on a daily basis for VSiN, so you'll be able to get some of my favorite props of the day if you're regularly checking out the website. However, I know that part of the fun in betting is doing it yourself. With that in mind, I want to give you some tips on how to go about player prop betting in a smart way.

LEARN FROM THE GAME SPREAD/TOTAL

The first thing I do when beginning to look for props is look at the spreads and totals for the day's slate. If a game has an extremely high total, you're likely going to have a chance to cash some Overs on points and assists. Similarly, if a game has a low total, you can probably find some good Under plays on the underdog's side. Or you might be able to look to the blocks and steals markets, as lower totals in the NBA are usually reserved for teams that play good defense or sloppy offense. The one caveat there is that a low total could simply mean that one or both of the teams in that game play at a slow pace. Pace of play is one of the many things that is available on the official NBA stats page.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Not only is pace available on the NBA's stats pages, but their advanced stats are the ultimate resource for sports bettors. It's amazing the type of information they provide for free, and learning how to mine those pages can be crucial when trying to become a profitable player prop bettor.

In addition to looking for the spreads and totals on a specific game, I regularly take note of where teams stand in certain advanced stat categories. For example, the Wizards had the second-lowest rebound percentage in basketball last year. Knowing that helps you look to Washington's opponents as potential Over bets on rebound totals. Meanwhile, the Jazz happened to have the highest turnover ratio in basketball last year. That could mean that backing the Over on steals for one of the players on the opposing team can be a smart bet. But the overall theme here is that

there's a lot out there that can help you. Don't go into this blindly.

We also have a VSiN Daily Prop Analyzer that lists all the players that are playing on any given evening. It tells you what their prop totals are for points, rebounds, assists, and threes made. It also lets you know how they have performed with those totals throughout the season, and it even allows you to sort by which players have been most profitable. That's a tool you'll want to regularly use when betting props.

In addition to the Prop Analyzer, we'll also have Opta AI Player Projections this season. That means we'll have tons of data-driven projections for you every single night. You'll be able to compare those projections directly to the DraftKings Sportsbook prop lines, and the information will be sortable. Find the biggest differences between the projections and the lines, and you'll find the biggest edges.

> " Find the biggest differences between the projections (player) and the lines, and you'll find the biggest edges. "

DON'T BE AFRAID TO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Sometimes a player's statistics don't tell the whole story. For example, a point guard might set their teammates up for great opportunities, but those guys might not be cashing in on them. That could mean that the passer's assist numbers will be a little down. But I like to find teams that are playing against weak defensive opponents and then look at the NBA's "potential assists" numbers. I think this is an even better way of approaching assist props than by looking at assists per game. It's just so important to be betting on players that consistently put their teammates in good positions to score. When combining potential assists with a weak opponent and a game in which both teams play at a fast pace, you're going to have a good chance of hitting your assist Overs. This is one of my favorite angles on the player props market.

There are also other things you can do. For example, a known marksman from deep might be in the middle of a cold stretch shooting the ball, which leads to lower three-point totals than usual. But looking at older percentages will tell you that those stretches are bound to end, which could lead to favorable prices and profitable outcomes.

Looking at one-on-one matchups within a game can also be helpful. If a team has a bad

defensive center taking on the assignment of guarding Nikola Jokic, what does that mean? Sure, he's the best passing big man in the NBA — and arguably the best passing big ever — but he might look to score more than usual in that situation. These are things you want to be thinking about often. Don't just look at numbers. Try to think about how a game will play out.

PLAYER PROP LADDERS

Another fun way to bet props is by building a player prop ladder. This is when you take a player's main Over, but then also sprinkle on a few alternate lines at bigger numbers and longer odds. For example, if Devin Booker's point total is 27.5, you might also play 30+, 35+, and maybe even 40+ at higher prices. The idea is that if you think a player is in a great spot to go off, you can turn that read into a higher-upside bet.

That said, ladders aren't something you want to do every night. You're basically betting on outlier performances, so it's best to save them for when everything lines up — good matchup, fast pace, competitive spread, and a player with real ceiling potential. Guys who can stay hot for long stretches, or have heavy usage, are usually the best candidates.

The key is to treat the ladder as one bet idea rather than four or five separate ones. If you normally risk one unit, maybe put half a unit on the base Over, then split the rest across the higher alternate lines. That way you're keeping the risk reasonable but giving yourself a chance to cash something big if the player really explodes.

BE SOMEWHAT ACTIVE ON X

Nobody needs to sit there refreshing social media nonstop, but you're going to want to follow some of the league's bigger news breakers and check X in the hours leading up to the daily NBA slate. While the NBA is trying to cut down on the "load management" problem, there's simply no way around it. Teams are not going to overlook the benefits of giving their players some extra rest, which means key players still be rested here and there. When they are, you're going to want to pounce on their teammates to step in and replace some of their numbers.

DON'T GO OVERBOARD

As with anything, you want to be careful when betting player props. There are so many options available on any given night, so you might be tempted to spray the board. But try and limit yourself to the few that you're very confident in. Also, I'd personally suggest staying away from parlays with more than two or three legs. I know people post tickets to X in which they're turning $5 into $50,000 and whatnot, but those are fool's gold and extremely difficult to hit. You're better off being consistent and earning small profits over an extended period of time.

STEVE MAKINEN'S
POWER RATINGS

TEAM	POWER RATING
OKLAHOMA CITY	105.0
CLEVELAND	103.5
DENVER	103.0
HOUSTON	102.5
NEW YORK	102.0
MINNESOTA	101.0
ORLANDO	101.0
LA CLIPPERS	100.5
LA LAKERS	100.5
ATLANTA	99.5
DETROIT	99.5
GOLDEN STATE	99.5
MILWAUKEE	99.0
PHILADELPHIA	99.0
SAN ANTONIO	99.0
BOSTON	98.0
DALLAS	98.0
INDIANA	97.5
MEMPHIS	97.5
MIAMI	96.5
TORONTO	96.5
SACRAMENTO	96.0
NEW ORLEANS	95.0
PORTLAND	95.0
CHICAGO	94.5
PHOENIX	94.0
BROOKLYN	92.0
CHARLOTTE	92.0
WASHINGTON	91.0
UTAH	90.5

ATLANTA
HAWKS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHEAST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 40-44 SU & 41-43 ATS, 50-32-2 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99.5
(#11 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

ATLANTA WAS 27-14 OVER THE TOTAL AT HOME IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Hawks finished 18th in the NBA in adjusted offensive rating (113.7) last season, while Cleaning The Glass had them 14th in points per 100 possessions (115.2). But a leap could be on the horizon.

Even without factoring in offseason additions, better health alone might have pushed Atlanta toward top-10 production last year. When Trae Young, Dyson Daniels, Jalen Johnson, and Onyeka Okongwu shared the floor, the Hawks scored 126.1 points per 100 possessions.

Johnson is back healthy after labrum surgery in January, and he's looking to build on a 2024-25 campaign in which he averaged 18.9 points, 10.0 rebounds, and 5.0 assists. He's a dynamic slasher, a good playmaker, and he's making strides with his jumper. If he continues to progress, everything points up for Quin Snyder's group.

The Hawks are more heliocentric than some of Snyder's Jazz teams, but that's the nature of having Young. The eighth-year pro put up 24.2 points and 11.6 assists last year, and the Hawks need to lean on his pick-and-roll creation. But, as The Ringer's Zach Lowe likes to highlight, Young set more screens in 2024-25 than in his first six seasons combined. Snyder has convinced him to buy into being useful off the ball — a necessity, with Daniels and Johnson needing touches. The result: a more equal-opportunity offense with multiple ball-handlers. That shift helped Atlanta play at the league's third-fastest pace (103.4), finish fifth in assist rate (68.2%), and establish tempo as a defining trait — something that should carry into 2025-26.

The front office also delivered one of the offseason's best hauls, adding Nickeil Alexander-Walker, Kristaps Porzingis, and Luke Kennard.

Alexander-Walker brings secondary ball-handling and 38.1% three-point shooting. He'll fit well next to Young and organize some second-unit groups.

Porzingis gives Young a true pick-and-pop partner. Okongwu is an effective finisher, but

Porzingis is a different kind of weapon, averaging 19.5 points while shooting 41.2% from deep last year. He has cleared 37.5% from three in five of the last seven seasons, and his gravity should open driving lanes for everyone else. Encouragingly, he looked healthy with Latvia at EuroBasket, showing flashes of off-the-dribble creation and no signs of the illness that derailed his 2024-25 season.

Kennard is one of the NBA's purest shooters, hitting at least 39.4% from three every year of his career. He adds movement shooting and can also steady an offense when needed.

Put it all together, and Snyder has a roster full of quick decision-makers, spacing, and versatility. With Young and Johnson at the center and more weapons around them, including an improved 2024 No. 1 pick Zaccharie Risacher, this version of Atlanta could look more like Snyder's top-five Jazz offenses — with more threes, more pace, and endless lineup options.

DEFENSE
The defensive outlook is trickier. Building a top-10 defense around Young is tough, but top-15 metrics are possible if the roster stays healthy.

Daniels led the NBA in swipes last season (3.0 steals per game). At 6-foot-7, he's one of the league's better on-ball defenders and gives Atlanta a strong point-of-attack option. Johnson, despite some lapses, uses his length and athleticism to disrupt, and Risacher adds another long, active body. Together, those three can cause real problems.

Alexander-Walker should also be pivotal. He's a quality perimeter defender, and pairing him with Porzingis opens up schematic flexibility. Snyder hasn't had a rim protector like Porzingis in years, which limited his ability to replicate the Rudy Gobert-anchored drop scheme he thrived with in Utah. With Porzingis at the back line and Alexander-Walker and Daniels funnelling guards his way, that coverage could be viable in doses. Snyder won't live in drop every night, but he has the option.

The priority must be defending the arc. Atlanta gave up 37.7% shooting from three last year — third-worst in the league. It's hard to win consistently when opponents are comfortable taking the game's most valuable shot.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-1.6 (19TH)	10TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	113.7 (18TH)	8TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.3 (21ST)	10TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	103.4 (3RD)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

OUTLOOK
There's plenty to like here. Young and Johnson are All-Star caliber talents, and the front office has surrounded them with shooting, defense, and depth. Add in Snyder's tactical chops, and Atlanta looks like a legitimate player in what's shaping up to be a wide-open Eastern Conference.

The question is timing. How fast can it all click? It needs to happen quickly, because this is likely Young's last chance to prove he can be the engine of a winning team. Of course, what "winning" means to ownership is anyone's guess.

Either way, the roster is strong enough to justify an Over on the season win total and the team merits a look in the big-picture futures market. Hopefully, some subscribers grabbed the Hawks at 90-1 to win the conference, which was posted to VSiN.com in June.
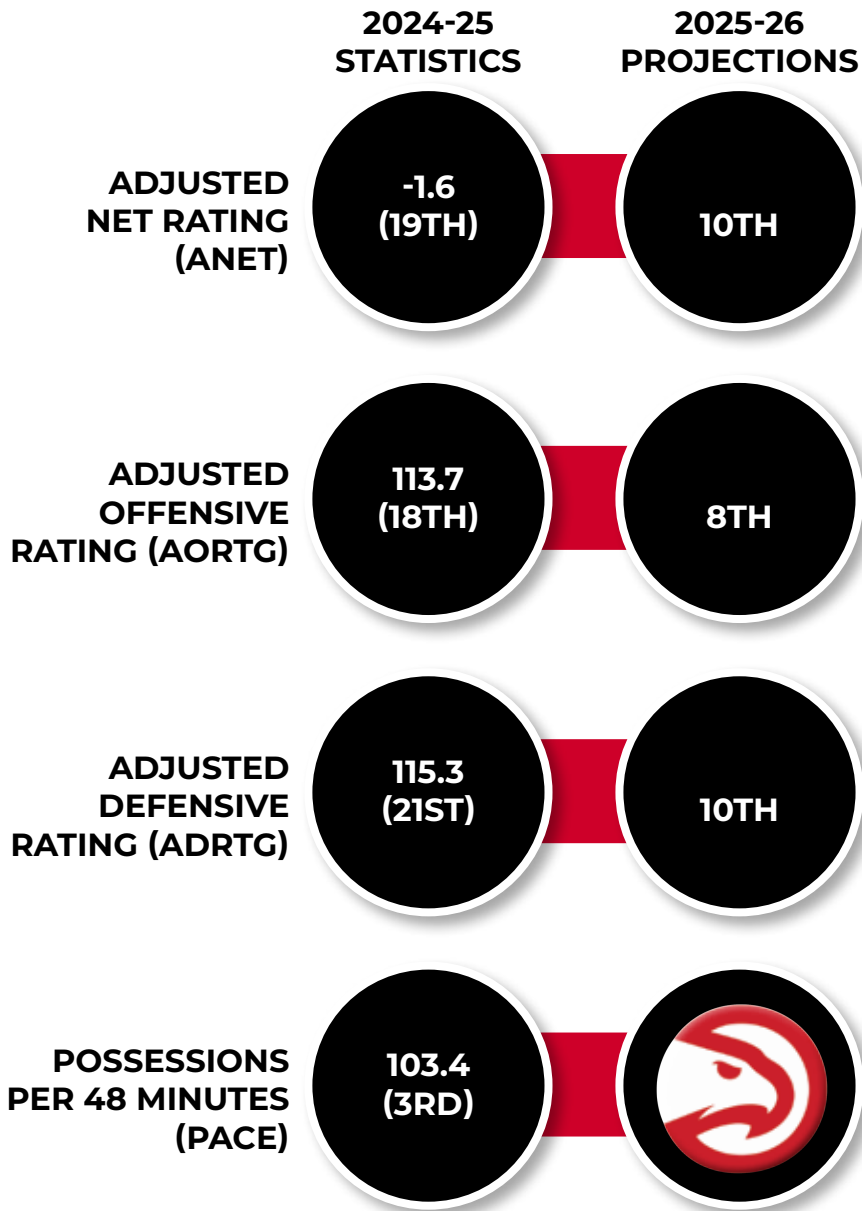
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 46.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
45-1	**10-1**	**+150**	**-750/+500**

BOSTON
CELTICS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · ATLANTIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 67-26 SU & 43-46-4 ATS, 42-50-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING   98.0
(#17 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

BOSTON WAS 28-18 UNDER THE TOTAL IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

With just under three minutes left in Game 4 of Boston's Eastern Conference Semifinal against New York, Jayson Tatum tore his Achilles. The Knicks were already up nine in that game and ahead 2-1 in the series, so don't let anyone tell you the injury cost Boston the series. But it will likely cost the Celtics the entire 2025-26 season.

Tatum is one of the best players in the world. The 27-year-old has been the centerpiece of a Boston offense that's finished top-five in adjusted offensive rating in four straight years — including setting the all-time mark in 2023-24 (122.0).

Last season, Tatum averaged 26.8 points, 8.7 rebounds, and 6.0 assists. He's shown he can score 30+ per game when needed, posting 30.1 per night in 2022-23. He also does it efficiently, ranking eighth in Estimated Plus-Minus (+4.2) last season. Step-backs, side-steps, downhill drives — he scores every which way, all while staying within the flow of the offense.

Replacing a five-time All-NBA player is impossible, and the Celtics didn't make it any easier by trading Jrue Holiday and Kristaps Porzingis, and letting Al Horford walk. All three were critical to Boston's recent dominance.

That leaves Jaylen Brown as the new No. 1 option. He battled through injuries last year, but he's only a few seasons removed from averaging 26.6 points. Brown has the tools: a clean jumper, mid-post scoring, elite athleticism, and a knack for cutting and running the floor. But his shaky handle has always made him a little more of a Robin than a Batman.

Derrick White and Anfernee Simons will have to carry big loads, too. White has become one of the league's top shooters, taking 9.1 threes per game last season while still hitting 38.4%. His efficiency may dip with more volume, but he'll scale up just fine. Simons, meanwhile, gets a fresh start after averaging 19.3 points in Portland on 36.3% shooting from deep. He fits the Celtics' three-

point-heavy philosophy and should thrive with better spacing and structure.

Boston can also rely on Payton Pritchard and Sam Hauser. One of them could even step into a starting role. Pritchard is a flamethrower off the dribble who can sneak in some drives. Hauser is a lights-out catch-and-shoot weapon who stretches defenses to their limits.

One thing is certain: Joe Mazzulla's Celtics will keep firing from deep. Last year they attempted 48.2 threes per game, the most in NBA history. Golden State shot the second-most threes last year, but the Warriors took nearly six fewer per game. "Mazzullaball" has been wildly effective since he took over, and he won't slow down now, even if the loss of stretch bigs makes it trickier.

The real concerns are the center spot and overall depth. Relying on Neemias Queta, Chris Boucher, and Luka Garza to man the five is dicey, and the overall rotation feels thinner than it has in years. Mazzulla will need unexpected contributions from somewhere to keep Boston afloat. He'll also need Brown to play 70+ games. This team isn't talented enough to win without him.

DEFENSE
Losing Tatum hurts on both ends. He's long been a steady wing defender. Trading Holiday — one of the best point-of-attack defenders in the league — for Simons, who has been poor defensively, only compounds the problem. Add in the departures of Porzingis, Horford, and even Luke Kornet (an underrated rim deterrent and creator of the "Kornet Contest"), and Boston has shed a ton of defensive toughness and versatility.

The Celtics will be smaller and more vulnerable. White remains an excellent guard defender, and Brown can handle most wing assignments, while Queta and Boucher offer more on this end than they do offensively. But expecting another top-10 defense — something Boston has achieved in four straight seasons — is unrealistic. Dunks & Threes projects them to fall outside the top 20.

If there's a silver lining, it's Mazzulla's system. Boston has excelled at transition defense and three-point contests, holding opponents to 34.7% from deep last year (third-best in the NBA). If Mazzulla can drill the same principles into the new rotation, the Celtics might at least scrape by with a respectable defense.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+8.6 (2ND)	12TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	119.4 (2ND)	5TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	110.7 (6TH)	21ST
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE):	96.6 (29TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

OUTLOOK
It feels strange to talk about the Celtics as anything but contenders, but that's the reality: without Tatum and with so much roster turnover, Boston could struggle to reach .500 and they aren't a lock to make the playoffs — even in a weak East.

The dream scenario would be overachieving, sneaking into the postseason, and then welcoming back Tatum for a surprise run. Early reports suggest he's recovering quickly, but the team is unlikely to rush him.

The likelier outcome is Boston taking its lumps in 2025-26, regrouping, and aiming to reload around a healthy Tatum next summer. The window isn't closed, but it's a little fogged up.
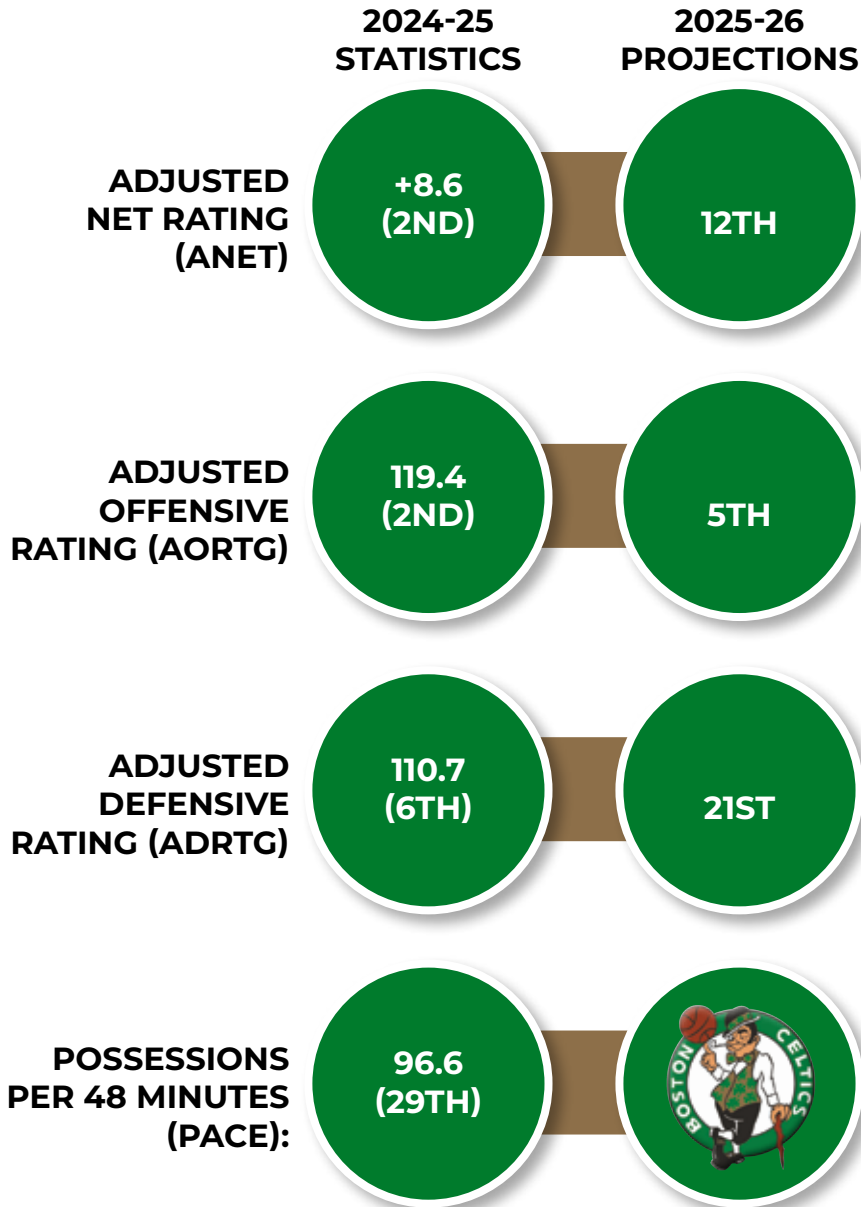
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION UNDER 41.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
80-1	20-1	11-1	-165/+135

BROOKLYN
NETS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · ATLANTIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 26-56 SU & 42-39-1 ATS, 38-44 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING **92.0**
(#27 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

BROOKLYN WAS 14-27 SU BUT 25-15 ATS ON THE ROAD IN THE 2024-25 SEASON
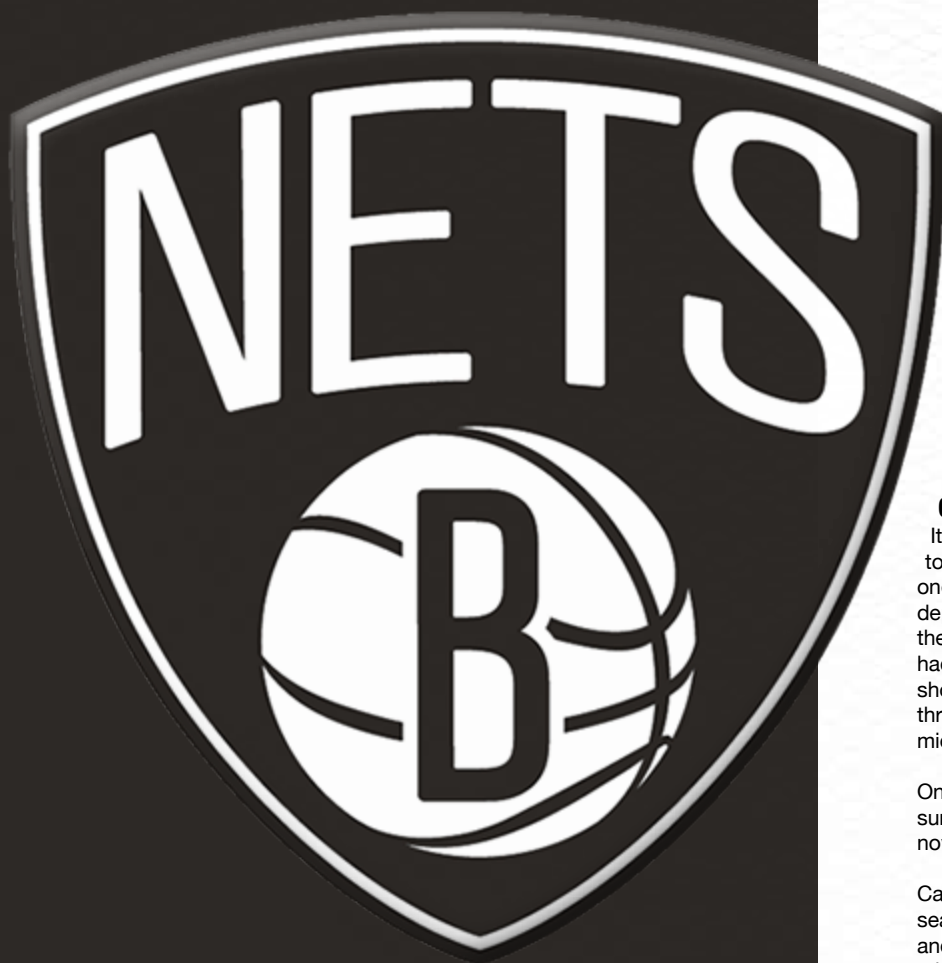
OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

It might take some time for the wider public to catch on, but Jordi Fernandez looks like one of the best coaches in the NBA. The Nets' depth chart is a revolving door right now, with the franchise openly tanking, but Fernandez still had his "island of misfit toys" prioritizing the right shots. Last season, Brooklyn ranked eighth in three-point attempts per game (39.4) and 25th in mid-range frequency (26.1%).

Once the Nets put together a real roster, don't be surprised if the offense is legitimately good. For now, though, it'll be organized chaos.

Cam Thomas is the go-to guy. In 25 games last season, he averaged career highs in scoring (24.0) and assists (3.8). Thomas still takes his share of mid-range jumpers, but Fernandez is fine with it because he makes tough ones at a decent clip. The bigger question is his playmaking. He showed improvement as a passer last year, but more growth is needed to shake his "empty-calorie scorer" label. Accepting a one-year, $6 million qualifying offer this summer made that clear — he'll need to prove he can do more to secure a payday next offseason.

Michael Porter Jr. will also get plenty of touches. The Nets swapped Cam Johnson for Porter, picking up an unprotected 2032 first in the process. Johnson had been an integral part of Brooklyn's offense, capable of shooting and creating a bit. Porter won't replicate the creation, but he is one of the NBA's premier shooters. He

hit 39.5% from deep last season and has cleared 39% in five of his six years. Fernandez will run plenty of actions to get him open, while trying to round out his game enough to make him either useful long-term or easier to trade.

The Nets at least know what they have in their role guys. Nic Claxton is a reliable rim runner and pick-and-roll finisher. Ziaire Williams and Haywood Highsmith are low-usage spot-up shooters. Terance Mann is a good cutter and finisher who can hit the occasional three — though Fernandez will likely push him to let it fly more often.

The wild cards are the rookies. Brooklyn took five first-rounders in the 2025 Draft: Egor Demin, Ben Saraf, Nolan Traore, Drake Powell, and Danny Wolf. Not all of them will play right away, but Demin — the No. 8 pick — should see heavy minutes. At 6'9", he's an electric ball handler who projects as a dynamic pick-and-roll creator. He'll easily live up to his draft slot if his jumper comes around.

The Nets also picked up Kobe Bufkin from Atlanta for cash. Blocked by Trae Young with the Hawks, Bufkin excelled in the G League (23.6 PPG, 5.9 APG, 5.4 RPG) last season. He's a capable driver, finisher, and shooter, and could carve out a role here.

The roster feels like a collection of independent contractors more than a team, but Fernandez will keep them organized. Expect a strange product, but one that comes ready to play, takes the right shots, and occasionally surprises.

DEFENSE
Defense is somehow a bigger issue. Brooklyn finished 27th in adjusted defensive rating (115.3) last season, and this group might sink even lower in 2025-26.

Swapping Johnson for Porter is a downgrade on this end, and the starting lineup now features multiple turnstiles. Realistically, only Williams, Mann, Highsmith, and Claxton care enough to consistently compete defensively. And Mann and Highsmith will lose minutes to younger players, further lowering the floor.

The Nets did prioritize length in the draft, but most of their rookies profile as offense-first guys. The end result could be a laughably bad defense.

OUTLOOK
This team is designed to lose games, collect young talent, and stockpile picks. There's not a single All-Star-level player on the roster, and the franchise's goals are clearly long-term.

That makes the Under the logical play on their win total. Brooklyn won 26 games last year, but most of the players responsible for a respectable 9-10 start are gone.

Still, this team might be worth backing situationally. The Nets were 42-39-1 ATS last season and, more impressively, 50-31-1 ATS in first quarters — tops in the league, with a +18.0% ROI. Fernandez has a way of getting his guys ready to compete, even if they don't sustain it for 48 minutes.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-6.9 (26TH)	29TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	108.4 (28TH)	30TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.3 (22ND)	27TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	96.7 (28TH)	NETS
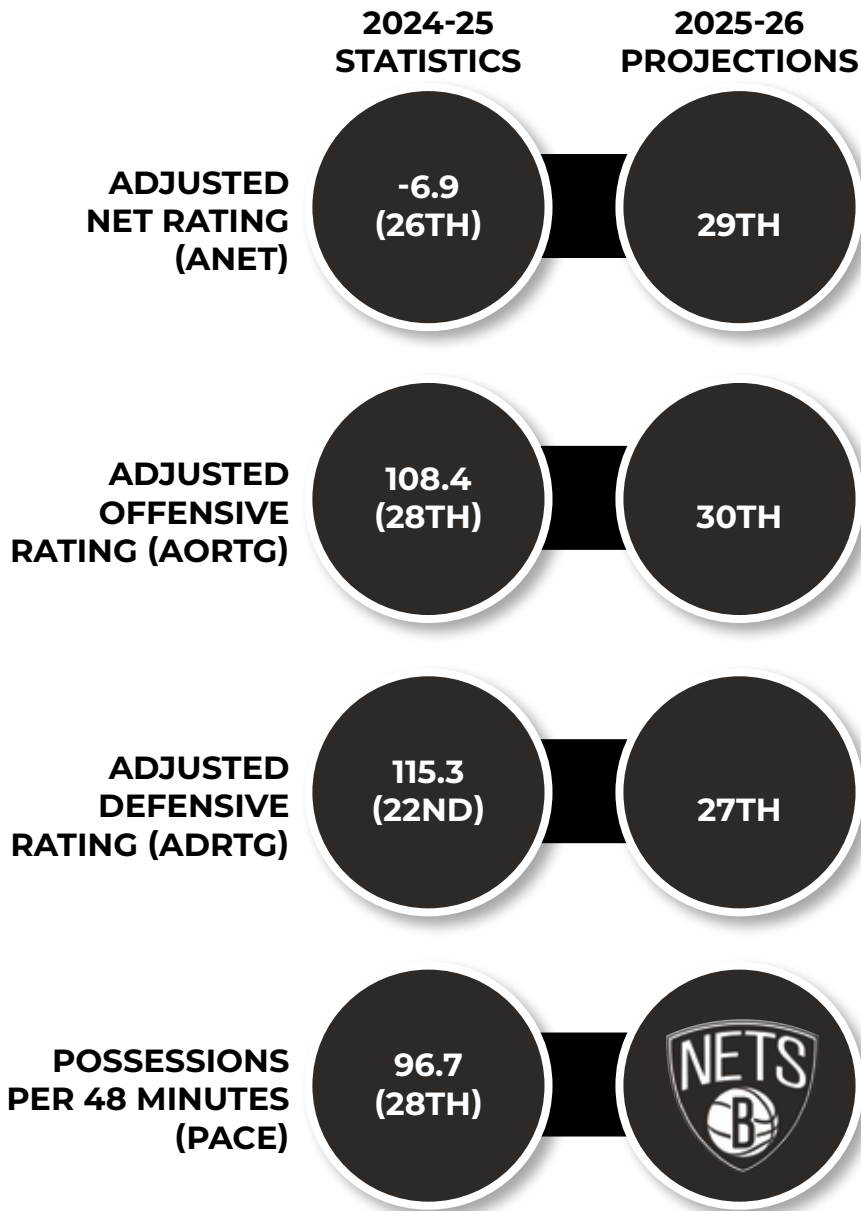
Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   **UNDER 20.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	**WIN CONFERENCE**	**WIN DIVISION**	**MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS**
1000-1	500-1	300-1	18-1/-6000

CHARLOTTE
HORNETS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHEAST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 19-63 SU & 36-43-3 ATS, 32-48-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 92.0
(#28 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

CHARLOTTE WAS 1-15 SU & 4-12 ATS IN DIVISIONAL GAMES LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Charles Lee won titles as an assistant with the Bucks and Celtics, and that experience shapes how he approaches the game. A disciple of Mike Budenholzer and Joe Mazzulla, Lee values quick decision-making, unselfish play, and a math-forward shot diet — the more threes the better.

Last season, Charlotte did a solid job getting attempts up, ranking 11th in the NBA in three-point attempts per game (38.3). The problem: the Hornets shot just 33.9% from deep, 28th in the league. They simply didn't have the shooters Lee's system demands, and LaMelo Ball missing 35 games didn't help.

Ball, who averaged 25.2 points and 7.4 assists, is a legitimate offensive engine. When he's unavailable, the entire offense sputters. Unfortunately, availability has been the story — he has played fewer than 52 games in four of his five seasons.

If Ball can't stay healthy, it's hard to imagine Charlotte improving much from the 29th-ranked adjusted offensive rating (106.9) they posted last year.

According to Cleaning The Glass, Charlotte scored just 107.4 points per 100 possessions in 2024-25. With Ball on the floor, though, that number rose to 114.3. And in lineups featuring Ball and Brandon Miller together, it jumped to 116.1. Miller, a smooth three-level scorer, averaged 21.0 points but also missed 55 games.

That duo simply needs better injury luck. When they're on the floor, they bend defenses, create shots, and make life easier for everyone else.

If Ball and Miller stay healthy, Charlotte should see natural improvement in both three-point percentage and overall efficiency. The front office also added one of the draft's best shooters in Duke's Kon Knueppel, who averaged 14.4 points and shot 40.5% from deep in his lone season in Durham. Knueppel is deadly off the catch, lethal off movement, and doesn't need heavy usage to make an impact. He's also a sharp passer with an underrated in-between game.

There's firepower off the bench, too. Tre Mann looked like one of the league's top reserves last year and earned a three-year, $24 million extension. He's electric off the dribble. Charlotte also added Collin Sexton and Spencer Dinwiddie — proven scorers, with Sexton in particular bringing a fierce competitiveness. Together, that trio cushions the blow if Ball misses time.

The frontcourt remains the big question. Miles Bridges is good for 16 points a night, and Grant Williams is a reliable floor-spacer and ball-mover. But Tidjane Salaun, the team's 2024 first-rounder, is still raw. And the center depth chart should come with a warning, as it could induce vomiting.

Moussa Diabate will likely start. He plays hard and attacks the offensive glass but brings little offensive polish. Mason Plumlee, a former Hornet, is a solid locker-room presence but he's no longer good enough athletically to warrant big minutes. The team is hopeful about Ryan Kalkbrenner, drafted 34th in 2025, but he projects as a defensive contributor before anything else.

It's tough to imagine a team in worse shape at a key position, and the rest of the roster isn't good enough to compensate. Expect Charlotte to keep building better habits under Lee, but offensively, a top-20 finish seems like the ceiling.

DEFENSE

The Hornets held their own against above-the-break threes last year, but they were torched in the corners. Per Cleaning The Glass, opponents shot 43.0% on corner threes against them — worst in the NBA. That's a backbreaker, given the value of those shots. Opponents also connected well from mid-range, which Lee may tolerate schematically, but the bigger concern is that teams scored efficiently from virtually everywhere.

Diabate offers some defensive value, so the center position looks a little sturdier on this end — especially with Kalkbrenner projecting as an immediate-impact rim protector in whatever minutes he earns. Beyond them, though, Charlotte lacks reliable stoppers.

Miller has the tools and desire to become a strong wing defender, but consistency remains an issue. Meanwhile, the backcourt is a problem. Ball, Sexton, Mann, and Dinwiddie are all vulnerable at the point of attack. On the wing, Bridges and Williams don't inspire more confidence.

Ironically, Knueppel — an average athlete — may end up being one of Charlotte's more dependable defenders. At the very least, he competes and consistently positions himself well.

Lee coaxed this group into finishing 24th in adjusted defensive rating (115.8) last year, which felt like overachieving. Realistically, it's hard to project Charlotte as anything better than a top-20 defense this season.

OUTLOOK

Charlotte projects as a bottom-10 team on both ends again, but that doesn't automatically mean an Under on their win total. The Nets, for example, finished 28th in offense (108.4) and 22nd in defense (115.3) last season and still won 26 games. Charlotte has more talent.

If Ball and Miller stay on the court, 30 wins is within reach.

Ultimately, the Over is appealing because of Ball's track record. Just four years ago, he led the Hornets to 43 wins and a Play-In berth. Now, with Miller alongside him and Knueppel fitting neatly between them, there's reason for optimism.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-8.9 (29TH)	27TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	106.9 (29TH)	27TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.8 (24TH)	23RD
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.2 (23RD)	
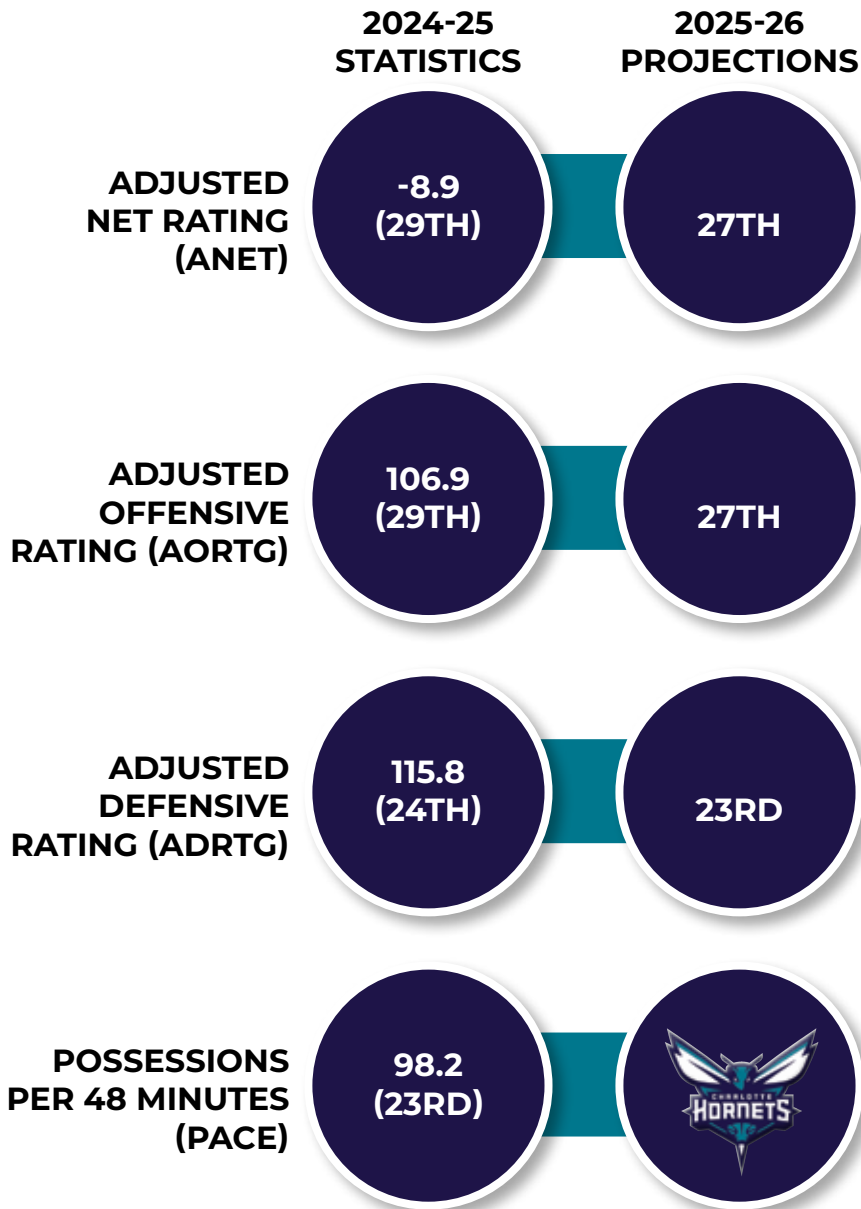
Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   **OVER 25.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
1000-1	500-1	150-1	10-1/-2000

CHICAGO
BULLS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · CENTRAL DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 39-44 SU & 43-38-2 ATS, 42-40 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 94.5
(#25 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

CHICAGO WENT 19-11 OVER THE TOTAL VS. WESTERN CONFERENCE TEAMS LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Bulls finished bottom-10 in adjusted offensive rating (113.0) last season, and the foursome of Josh Giddey, Coby White, Matas Buzelis, and Nikola Vucevic managed just 112.9 points per 100 possessions together. That's a problem considering three of those names are supposed to be the future. Chicago would love to move on from Vucevic, but the market has made that nearly impossible.

The bright side: Billy Donovan still has Kevin Huerter, and that group scored 121.4 points per 100 possessions with him. "Red Velvet" knocked down 37.6% of his threes in 26 games, giving Chicago some much-needed spacing.

The Bulls also played the right way. They ranked third in three-point attempts per game (42.0) and shot a respectable 36.7% on those tries. That's a huge shift for a franchise that once lived in the mid-range area. Chicago also kept turnovers in check (14.1%) while playing at the league's second-fastest pace (103.7). It's clear Donovan wants to leverage this team's youth and athleticism by pushing the tempo.

Oddly enough, everything starts with Giddey, who inked a four-year, $100 million extension after being acquired for Alex Caruso. He averaged 14.6 points, 8.1 rebounds, and 7.2 assists last year, with the boards and assists both career highs. He also shot a career-best 37.8% from three. Giddey's size and vision make him one of the league's top passers, but defenses will keep daring him to shoot until he proves to be consistent from deep.

White complements him well. While Giddey is pass-first, White is a gunner. He averaged 20.4 points per game last season and hit 37.0% from deep on 7.9 attempts per game. White takes tough shots, makes plenty of them, and at 25 the Bulls are hoping there's still another leap to come.

The wild card is Buzelis. At 6-foot-10 with length and athleticism, he flashes star potential with highlight dunks and confident self-creation. The next step is polish, and proving he can shoot near 40% from deep long-term.

Chicago also added Noa Essengue with the 12th pick in 2025. Expectations are modest for this year, but his athleticism and developing perimeter

game make him an intriguing long-term fit alongside Buzelis.

In the meantime, Ayo Dosunmu and Patrick Williams will see heavy minutes. Dosunmu offers reliable shooting, secondary playmaking, and a low-maintenance role. Williams, however, needs to rediscover his shot. After hitting 39.9% from three in 2023-24, he slipped to 35.3% last year. With a big extension already signed, Chicago needs tangible development.

The bench is solid, though not spectacular. Tre Jones is a steady backup point guard, Dalen Terry and Isaac Okoro bring energy but shaky shooting, and Jalen Smith and Zach Collins add size with a bit of floor spacing.

This won't be a great offense, but the core pieces give Donovan enough to push toward league average.

DEFENSE

Chicago finished 19th in adjusted defensive rating (115.1) last season, which actually undersells the job Donovan did. With Giddey, White, and Vucevic all defensive liabilities, keeping this team afloat was impressive. After the All-Star break, the Bulls ranked 10th in raw defensive rating (111.7) and flirted with top-five over that stretch.

Defending the three became a late-season strength. Over the final 27 games, opponents shot just 34.3% from deep. The question is whether Chicago can sustain that over a full year. Given how easily Giddey and White can be beaten off the dribble, and Vucevic's lack of rim protection, keeping that number on the lower end will be crucial.

There are good individual defenders here. Dosunmu is tough on the perimeter, Buzelis has length and athleticism, and role players like Jones, Okoro, and Williams like to guard. Essengue projects as versatile with the ability to guard multiple positions. Jevon Carter is also still around, a relentless pest who loves picking up full court.

On paper, this team has no business approaching top-10 defensive numbers. But Donovan has a track record of overachievement, and this group competes.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-2.1 (20TH)	24TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	113.0 (20TH)	23RD
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.1 (19TH)	25TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.6 (9TH)	

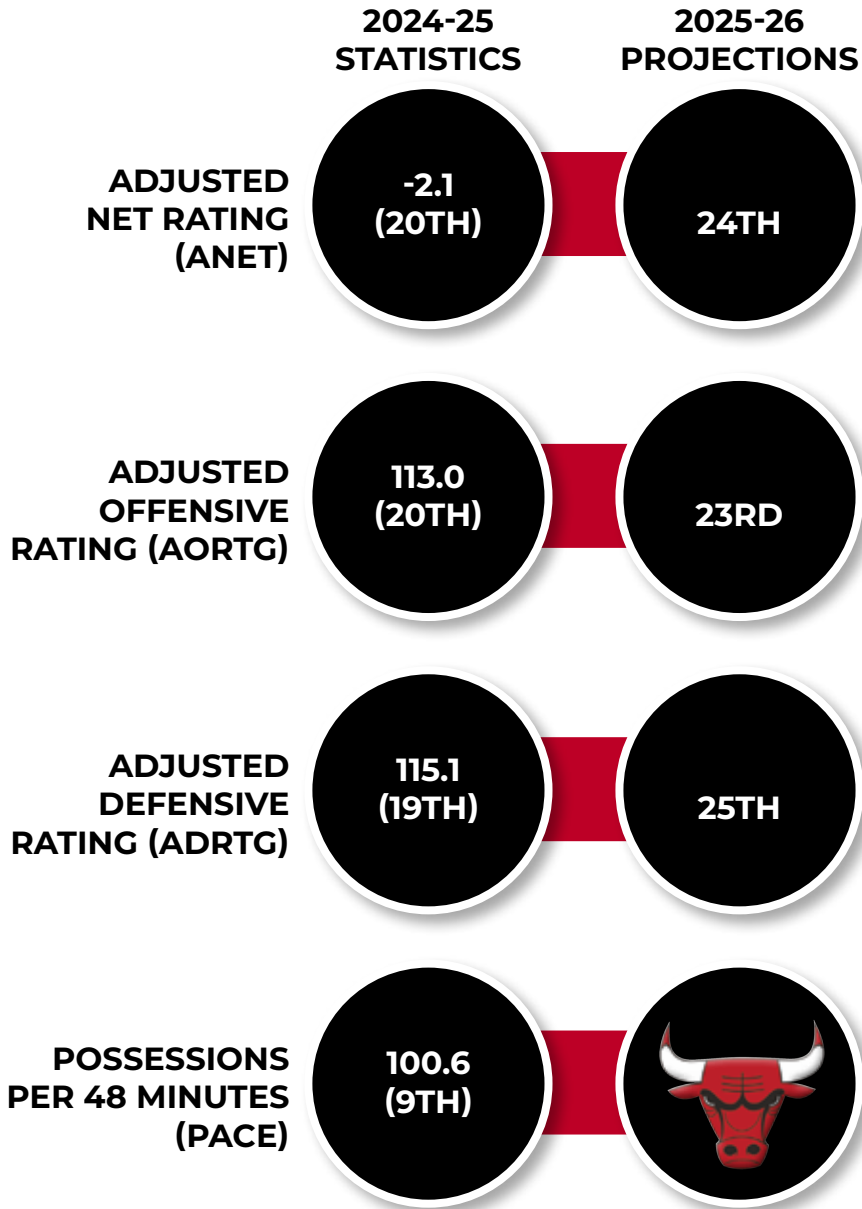*Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com*

OUTLOOK

The Bulls have been stuck in NBA purgatory: 40-42 in 2022-23, 39-43 in 2023-24, and 39-43 again last year. Each season ended the same way — eliminated by Miami in the Play-In. Too good to bottom out, not good enough to contend.

At least Chicago has finally started turning the page. DeMar DeRozan left last offseason, Zach LaVine was dealt at the deadline, and now Vucevic is the last man standing. Once he's gone, the Bulls will be fully committed to their younger players and positioned with real cap flexibility.

Still, even in transition, the Bulls feel undervalued. The win total is set at 32.5, but Donovan has won at least 39 games in nine of his 10 NBA seasons. The lone exception was his first year in Chicago — a lockout-shortened season that still produced 31 wins.

If Donovan has a competent roster, he can win games. And this is a competent roster.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   OVER 32.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
800-1	200-1	130-1	+450/-650

CLEVELAND
CAVALIERS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · CENTRAL DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 69-22 SU & 53-38 ATS, 56-33-2 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 103.5
(#2 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

CLEVELAND WENT OVER THE TOTAL IN 24 OF 30 GAMES VS. THE WEST LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Cavaliers were the best offensive team in basketball last year, finishing with a league-best adjusted offensive rating of 120.7 — just shy of Boston's historically excellent 122.0 in 2023-24.

Kenny Atkinson did exactly what he was hired to do. Cleveland wasn't bad under J.B. Bickerstaff, who guided them to a 48-34 record in his final season. But the Cavs ranked only 18th in adjusted offensive rating (114.6), and the front office wanted more. Atkinson, who patiently waited for the perfect head coaching opportunity, believed he had the blueprint.

Atkinson didn't get any major roster changes, but that wasn't a problem. He preached faster pace, quicker decisions, constant off-ball movement, and less dependence on Donovan Mitchell.

Mitchell still thrived, averaging 24.0 points and 5.0 assists while finishing ninth in Offensive EPM (+3.9). But what made Cleveland elite was the rest of the roster. Darius Garland, Evan Mobley, and Jarrett Allen all posted career-best OEPM numbers, with Garland and Mobley joining Mitchell at the All-Star Game. Mobley, in particular, was a revelation.

Unlocking Mobley was Atkinson's top priority. He averaged 18.5 points, 9.3 rebounds, and 3.2 assists, but more importantly, he expanded his shooting. After attempting just 1.2 threes per game at 37.3% in 2023-24, he upped that to 3.2 attempts at 37.0%. By stretching defenses, Mobley not only became a bigger scoring threat but also created space for cutters and drivers.

The depth helped, too. Ty Jerome, De'Andre Hunter, Max Strus, Sam Merrill, Isaac Okoro, Craig Porter Jr., and Dean Wade all contributed, with Jerome standing out in a Sixth Man of the Year-caliber season (12.5 PPG, 3.4 APG, 51.6/43.9/87.2 shooting splits).

This year, the Cavs expect more of the same all around. Regression is possible as teams adjust,

which happened in the second half of the year. But this still profiles as a top-five offense.

Losing Jerome to Memphis was one of the few blows to this roster over the summer. But Cleveland dealt Okoro for Lonzo Ball, who could be an upgrade as the first guard off the bench if he can stay healthy. Ball isn't quite as good as Jerome from three, but he has shot at least 37.5% from deep in three of his last four seasons. He's also a much better playmaker.

Health is the main concern here. Garland needed surgery for a toe injury that derailed the end of his season, and Strus — who hit 38.6% from deep — will miss a few months with a broken foot. Others will need to step up, and Jaylon Tyson could be the one. The 2024 first-rounder was so good at the Vegas Summer League that the front office decided to shut him down.

The biggest variable, though, remains Mobley. Atkinson will keep demanding more, the way Christopher Walken demanded more cowbell. Mobley already made a huge leap, but he has top-10 player potential. Playing with more assertiveness and less deference to teammates could prevent the playoff stagnation that forces Mitchell into Superman mode.

DEFENSE

Cleveland's trees were a nightmare for opponents last year. With Allen and Mobley on the floor together, opponents managed just 110.3 points per 100 possessions. Both protect the rim at a high level, and both can survive on the perimeter, which is rare.

Allen finished in the 96th percentile in DEPM (+1.8), slightly above Mobley (+1.6). Still, Mobley claimed Defensive Player of the Year and his second First-Team All-Defense nod. His agility is what makes the pairing viable, allowing him to guard quicker forwards while Allen mans the paint.

Ball adds intrigue. His health will always be a question, but before injuries, he was one of the league's best perimeter disruptors. Even last season in Chicago, after two years off, his metrics were very favorable defensively (+1.4 DEPM). Normally, Cleveland lacks backcourt stoppers. Ball could change that.
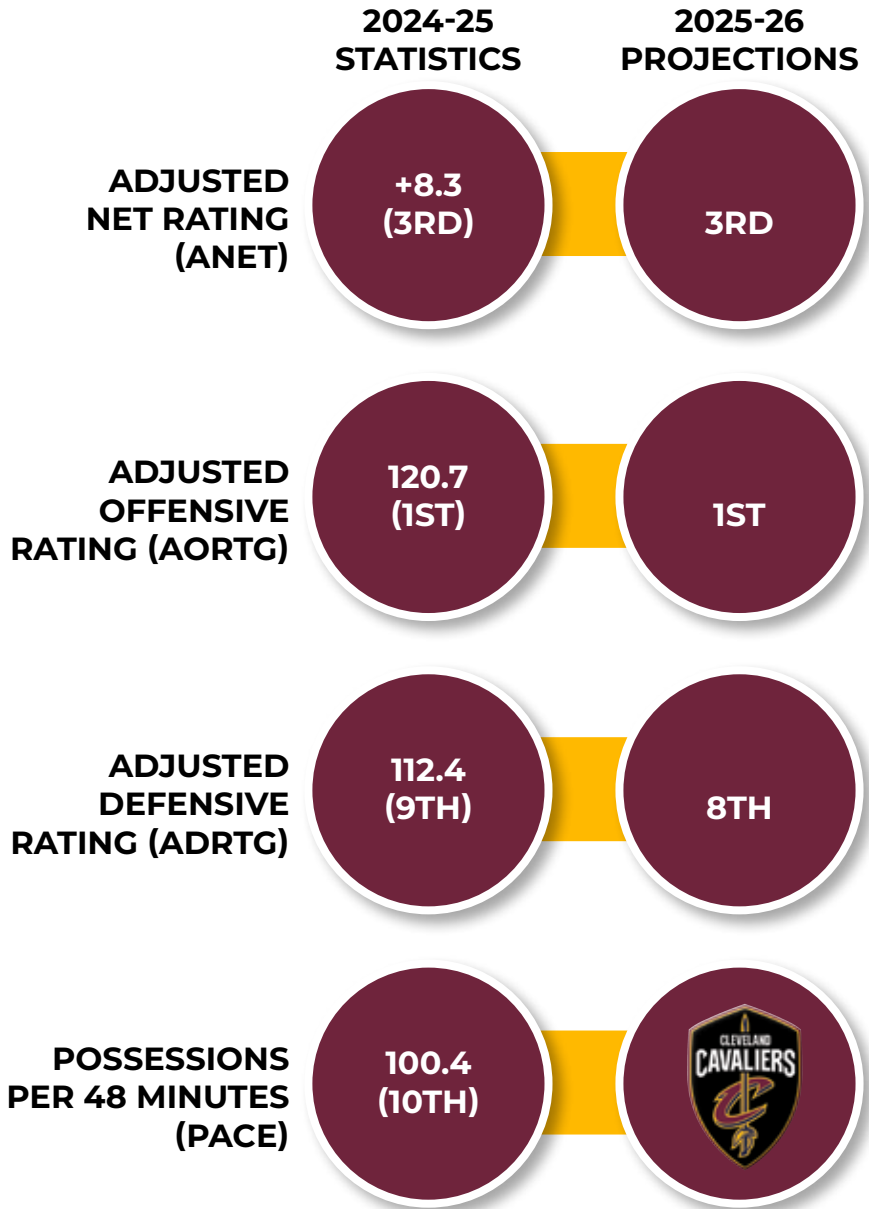
Hunter, Wade, and Tyson give Atkinson some capable defenders on the wing, while Strus, despite athletic limitations, competes hard. The reality, though, is that Mitchell and Garland cap the defensive ceiling. In the playoffs, when teams relentlessly hunt weak links, that's the Cavs' biggest vulnerability.

OUTLOOK

The Eastern Conference is considered wide open, but Cleveland has the talent to slam that window shut. This team wasn't healthy when Indiana sent them packing in the second round, but most of the talk was about the Cavaliers' shortcomings. Run it back healthy, and they could flip the narrative.

For the regular season, health concerns make the Under 56.5 wins the safer call. Still, Cleveland has a great shot at winning the East (+240) and an outside shot at winning the title (+800). So, after last year's extraordinary regular season and playoff flameout, there's only one thing left to do: win the whole f****** thing.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+8.3 (3RD)	3RD
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	120.7 (1ST)	1ST
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	112.4 (9TH)	8TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.4 (10TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **UNDER 56.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
+800	+230	-450	-2000/30-1

DALLAS
MAVERICKS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 40-44 SU & 39-43-2 ATS, 47-37 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING   98.0
(#16 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

DALLAS WAS 12-1 OVER THE TOTAL IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The big question for Dallas is when Kyrie Irving will return from the torn ACL he suffered in March. That will ultimately determine how good this offense can be. With Irving — who averaged 24.7 points, 4.8 rebounds, and 4.6 assists on 47.3/40.1/91.6 shooting splits — the Mavericks have everything they need to look like a top-10 offensive team.

Irving is one of the greatest isolation scorers in league history, a deadeye shooter, and a willing passer. Even if he was brought in as Luka Doncic's co-star, he's capable of running an elite offense himself.

Of course, Dallas also needs Anthony Davis to stay healthy. The former Laker was bothered by a groin injury late last year and required offseason eye surgery, adding to an already lengthy injury history. But when he's available, Davis is still a dominant face-up scorer and finisher. In 51 games between Los Angeles and Dallas last season, he averaged 24.7 points, 11.6 boards, and 3.5 assists.

Together, Irving and Davis give Dallas one of the best guard-big duos in basketball. And GM Nico Harrison, who has to wear a fake mustache around Dallas after shipping Luka away, has done good work filling in around them.

Klay Thompson, Max Christie, P.J. Washington, Dereck Lively II, Daniel Gafford, Caleb Martin, Naji Marshall, and Dante Exum are all back. Thompson isn't the versatile scorer he once was, but he remains deadly as a catch-and-shoot threat (39.1% on 7.7 attempts per game). Christie, an underrated piece of the Luka trade, averaged 11.2 points and is reliable both spotting up and creating a little off the dribble. Washington provides floor spacing (38.1% from deep) and the ability to attack closeouts. Lively and Gafford are both dangerous lob targets. Martin and Marshall are versatile glue guys who fit in any lineup. Exum is a steady backup guard who defends, moves the ball, and knocks down open shots.

Harrison also added D'Angelo Russell on a bargain two-year, $13 million deal. Russell's pull-up shooting and playmaking should hold down the fort until Irving returns, and he'll transition into an instant-offense sixth man afterward. Jaden Hardy could also get some reserve creator minutes.

And then there's Cooper Flagg, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2025 draft. The Duke product has long been billed as a generational prospect, and his combination of length, athleticism, and IQ should make him an immediate contributor. At 6-foot-9, Flagg is an explosive driver, a crafty mid-range scorer, and a better-than-expected shooter (38.5% at Duke). He's also a sharp passer, giving Jason Kidd the option of using him as a point forward.

All told, Dallas has the depth to function like a top-20 offense without Irving. Once he's back, the ceiling rises dramatically.

DEFENSE

If Davis stays healthy — always the caveat — this Mavericks team could be elite defensively. He's been in the 95th percentile or better in Defensive EPM in four straight seasons and 10 of 13 overall. Davis remains a top-tier rim protector, post defender, and switch option. Lively has the tools to become similar, which gives Dallas the chance to mirror Cleveland's twin-towers look.

Flagg also projects as a special defender. His instincts as a help-side rim protector are elite, he plays passing lanes well, and his size and quickness allow him to guard multiple positions. There's a non-zero chance he develops into somebody that can guard one through five.

Dallas is stacked with wings who embrace defense. Martin, Marshall, Christie, and Washington all compete, giving Kidd flexibility in how he deploys lineups. The one weak spot is at point guard, where Irving and Russell are both shaky. Irving, at least, competes, and while he's out, Kidd can lean on Exum's size and defensive chops off the bench.

Kidd's system will help, too. He asks his players to pressure the ball and stay aggressive, which pairs well with one of the biggest, most athletic rosters in the league. With Davis, Flagg, and Lively, this group has the potential to suffocate opponents.

OUTLOOK

The Mavericks will be a strange team this season. Without Irving, they'll look like a Play-In squad. With him, they can beat anybody — including the Thunder.

That upside makes them worthy of a small play in the futures market. At 22-1 to win the West and 40-1 to win the title, there's value in taking a chance and crossing your fingers for good health. You might even get a better number if Dallas starts slow.

For the regular season, the Over on 39.5 wins looks appealing. The West is loaded, but this roster is deep, competitive, and built to grind out wins. With Davis anchoring the defense, Flagg developing on the fly, and Irving eventually returning, Dallas should be a problem.

ADVANCED STATISTICS
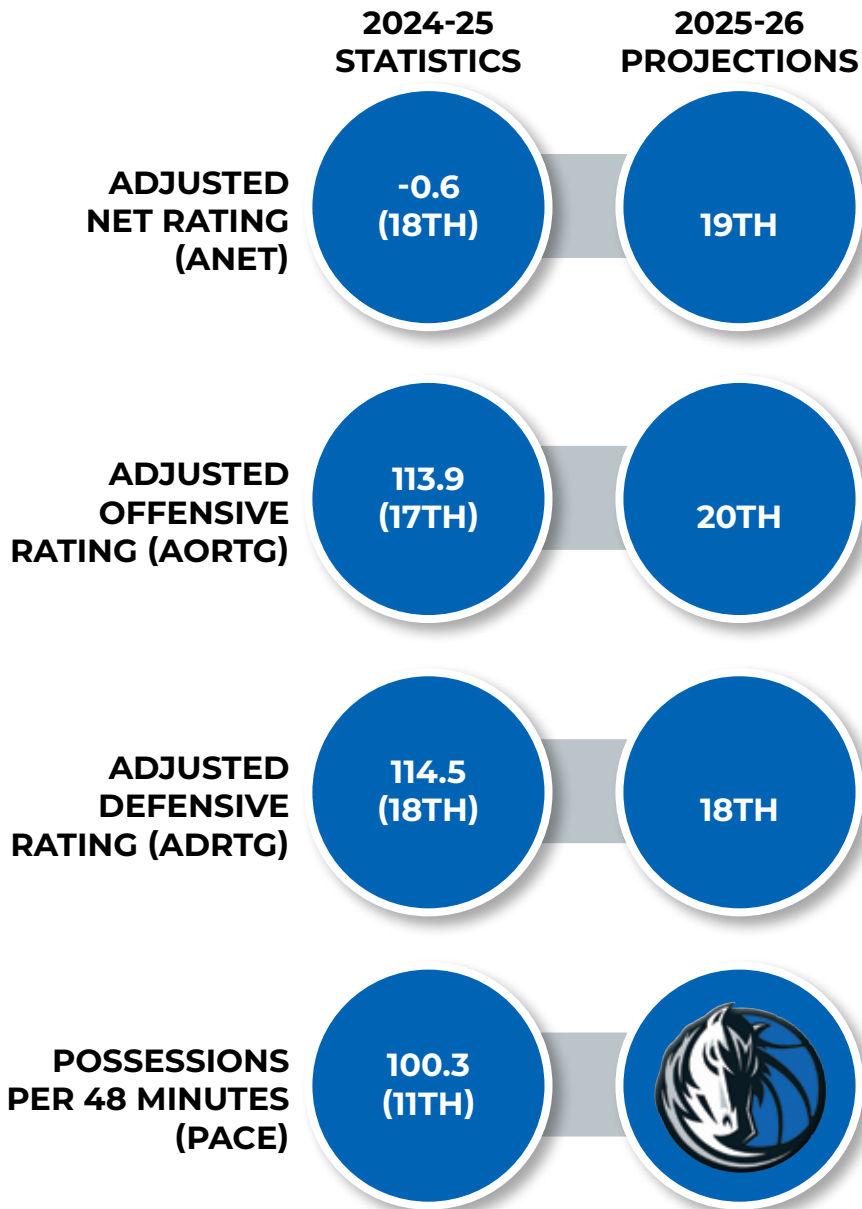
	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-0.6 (18TH)	19TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	113.9 (17TH)	20TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	114.5 (18TH)	18TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.3 (11TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 39.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
30-1	19-1	+950	+115/-140

DENVER
NUGGETS

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 103.0
(#3 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

DENVER POSTED A 22-8 OVER THE TOTAL RECORD VS. EASTERN CONFERENCE FOES LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Nuggets raised eyebrows when they fired Mike Malone, the coach who guided them to the 2022-23 title. But behind the scenes, friction was building. Malone clashed with the front office over playing time for recent draft picks, and meanwhile Denver's defense was slipping.

Since David Adelman had already been the architect of the offense, promoting him made sense. He wasn't going to break what worked, and he might bring fresh ideas elsewhere.

That's exactly how it played out. Adelman did a strong job as interim head coach, guiding Denver back to elite status and pushing eventual champion Oklahoma City to seven games in the second round. Now, instead of starting over, the Nuggets enter the season with continuity. Adelman will keep making life easy for Nikola Jokic, adding small tweaks without changing the formula.

Jokic, for his part, was brilliant again. His 29.6 points and 10.2 assists per game were career-best marks, and he added 12.7 rebounds per game. Jokic also shot a career-best 41.7% from three on increased volume. His +7.8 Offensive EPM led the league. He's still the best offensive player in basketball — dominant on the block, automatic with his floater, improved as a shooter, and unmatched as a passer, regardless of position.

Jokic will continue to work with Jamal Murray, Aaron Gordon, and Christian Braun. The Murray-Jokic two-man game remains impossible to defend when Murray's healthy. He battled through another up-and-down regular season but was there when it mattered, still a deadly pull-up shooter and clutch scorer. Gordon, meanwhile, reinvented himself as a sniper, jumping from 29.0% to 43.6% from three last year. He remains a lob threat and versatile playmaker. Braun keeps

improving his jumper, adds rim pressure, and impacts games without needing touches.

The big offseason move was trading Michael Porter Jr. for Cameron Johnson. Porter was productive during the title run, but declining health and poor defense led to the change. Johnson averaged 18.8 points for Brooklyn on 47.5/39.0/89.3 splits. He's one of the league's elite shooters, but also a more versatile scorer and smarter decision-maker than Porter. Johnson attacks closeouts, makes quick reads, and has enough athleticism to finish plays as a cutter alongside Jokic. The fit looks seamless.

The bench features Tim Hardaway Jr., Bruce Brown, Julian Strawther, Peyton Watson, and Jonas Valanciunas. Hardaway is streaky but offers shooting and secondary scoring. Brown returns to the role he thrived in during Denver's championship run: cutting, driving, and feeding off Jokic. Strawther is a floor-spacer who should eventually push his three-point percentage into the high 30s. Watson is a high-energy athlete who's learning to contribute consistently. Valanciunas provides legitimate low-post scoring, making him arguably the best backup center the Nuggets have ever had behind Jokic.

Denver now has the league's best player surrounded by a balanced mix of shooting, cutting, and creation. Don't be surprised if this team finishes first in aORTG.

DEFENSE
Defense is the bigger question. After the All-Star break, Denver's raw defensive rating was 117.8 — essentially as bad as Washington's season-long number, which ranked 28th. That collapse was a big reason Malone lost his job.

Adelman won't turn the Nuggets into a defensive juggernaut, but he brought more structure late last season and into the playoffs. Braun and Gordon are the only true plus defenders in the starting lineup, but Jokic is better positionally than his reputation suggests. Off the bench, Brown and Watson add energy and versatility.

The encouraging part: Adelman is willing to experiment. He threw zones at the Thunder in the playoffs and has tried Jokic both at the level and in deep drop during pick-and-roll coverage. Denver probably won't be great defensively, but Adelman won't accept stagnation. Expect him to mix schemes in search of league-average results.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+3.8 (8TH)	5TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	119.0 (3RD)	2ND
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.2 (20TH)	13TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.6 (8TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

OUTLOOK
If this roster isn't better than the one that won the 2022-23 title, it's damn close. Jokic is surrounded by shooting and versatility, the bench is deeper than it's been in years, and Adelman has already shown he can steady the group.

The Nuggets are legitimate contenders again, arguably the team to beat in the West. But they've only won 55+ games once in the Jokic era, and health for guys like Murray and Gordon is always a concern. Add in how loaded the conference is, and nightly battles could cap the regular-season win total.

The smarter angle is backing Denver with plus-money futures — whether to win the West or another championship — rather than betting their win total. Everything they want is on the table.
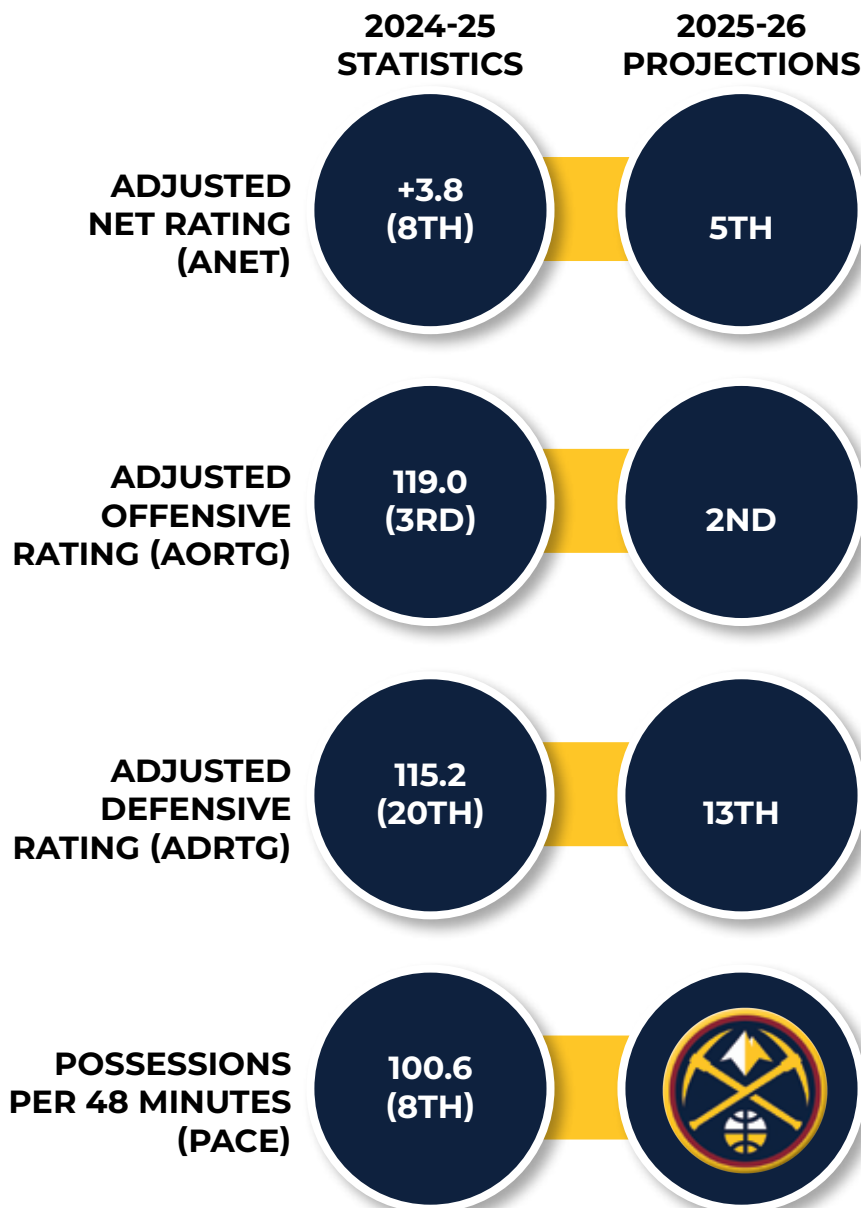
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   UNDER 54.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
+650	+450	+450	-3000/13-1

DETROIT
PISTONS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · CENTRAL DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 46-42 SU & 44-42-2 ATS, 44-43-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99.5
(#10 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

DETROIT WENT 24-20 SU & 25-17-2 ATS ON THE ROAD IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Cavaliers needed to move on from J.B. Bickerstaff, but he was exactly what the Pistons needed. Bickerstaff might not have gotten Cleveland over the hump, but that franchise won 22 or fewer games from 2018-19 to 2020-21. Then, in his second full season, he guided the Cavs to 44 wins. In Year 3, they won 51. He proved to be a steady hand, capable of establishing a winning environment. That's what Detroit had been missing.

Bickerstaff immediately gave a young Pistons roster structure, and some subtle tweaks led to big gains.

One was shot selection. In 2023-24, Detroit took 34.0% of its attempts from mid-range, the third-highest mark in the league, while only 32.7% came from three, the second-lowest rate. Last season, Bickerstaff cut mid-range attempts to 30.7% and raised the team's three-point rate to 36.1%.

Another was going all-in on Cade Cunningham. The young star's usage rate climbed from 29.8% to 32.3%, and the offense revolved around him with more purpose. Cunningham responded with a breakout year: 26.1 points, 9.1 rebounds, and 6.1 assists per game, plus All-Star and All-NBA Third Team honors. He solidified himself as a true franchise player.

Everything Detroit runs is built on Cunningham's creation. He has developed into an efficient three-level scorer who can drop 30 on any night, but his passing is just as dangerous. Having the ball in his hands generally means the Pistons get a good look.

Ausar Thompson and Jalen Duren are the other foundational pieces. Thompson is a freak athlete who terrifies defenses as a cutter and in transition, while also flashing playmaking instincts when collapsing defenses. If he develops a jumper, he's an All-NBA threat. Duren, still only 21, is a tank inside, finishing plays with power and showing surprising passing touch as a roll man. He and Thompson developed chemistry late last year, constantly creating easy looks for one another.

Now Detroit needs to sort out who complements that core. Tobias Harris remains a steady iso scorer who can bail them out late in the shot clock. Caris LeVert, signed in the offseason, brings veteran shot creation and Michigan ties. Duncan Robinson, another Wolverine alum and

career 39.7% three-point shooter, replaces the spacing lost with Tim Hardaway Jr. and Malik Beasley. Isaiah Stewart adds toughness as a backup five with some stretch ability.

The real X-factor is Jaden Ivey. Before a season-ending injury, he averaged 17.6 points per game on career-best efficiency (+0.4 OEPM). He's a downhill scorer with some shooting touch, but hasn't yet proved he's part of the long-term core. If he stays healthy, improves his mid-range game, and runs the offense capably when staggered from Cunningham, Detroit's ceiling rises considerably.

Ron Holland also has something to prove. The athletic rookie brings energy and effort, but his fit alongside Thompson will hinge on developing a jumper.

Detroit looks like a top-15 offense again. Swapping Dennis Schroder, Hardaway Jr., and Beasley for LeVert and Robinson was solid work by the front office, and the main pieces are all trending upward. If Thompson's leap comes quickly or Ivey delivers a strong season, a top-10 finish isn't out of reach.

DEFENSE
The Pistons finished 11th in adjusted defensive rating last season, and this year they have the tools to crack the top-10. Bickerstaff's defensive pedigree was evident, pulling Detroit out of the bottom five and into respectability. With the roster makeup, there's more growth to come.

Thompson's impact on this end can't be overstated. He's special defensively, capable of shutting down assignments while also creating chaos off the ball. He already looks like a future Defensive Player of the Year candidate and has raised the team's overall level.

Detroit also made big strides protecting the rim. Opponents shot just 64.9% at the basket last year, sixth-best in the NBA. One season earlier, that number was 68.0%, fifth-worst in the league.

This is also a group where everyone at least competes. Even players with limited defensive upside took pride in being in the right spots and making the extra effort. Cunningham is a good example — his athletic limitations have kept him from meeting pre-draft defensive expectations, but he was an average defender last season, which was an improvement.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+1.6 (13TH)	13TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	114.3 (14TH)	18TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	112.7 (11TH)	9TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.3 (12TH)	DETROIT PISTONS

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

OUTLOOK
The Pistons won 44 games last year, making 46 a realistic goal in 2025-26. This roster has the potential to rank top-10 in both offense and defense, a recipe for consistent regular-season success.

Given their youth and competitive edge, Detroit is built to grind through 82 games. Thompson's upside is sky-high, Cunningham is already a star, and there are multiple candidates — Ivey, Duren, even Holland — who could push this group higher.

It still feels like the Pistons are a year or two away from true contender status in the East. But with their assets, they could make a swing at the deadline that accelerates the process.
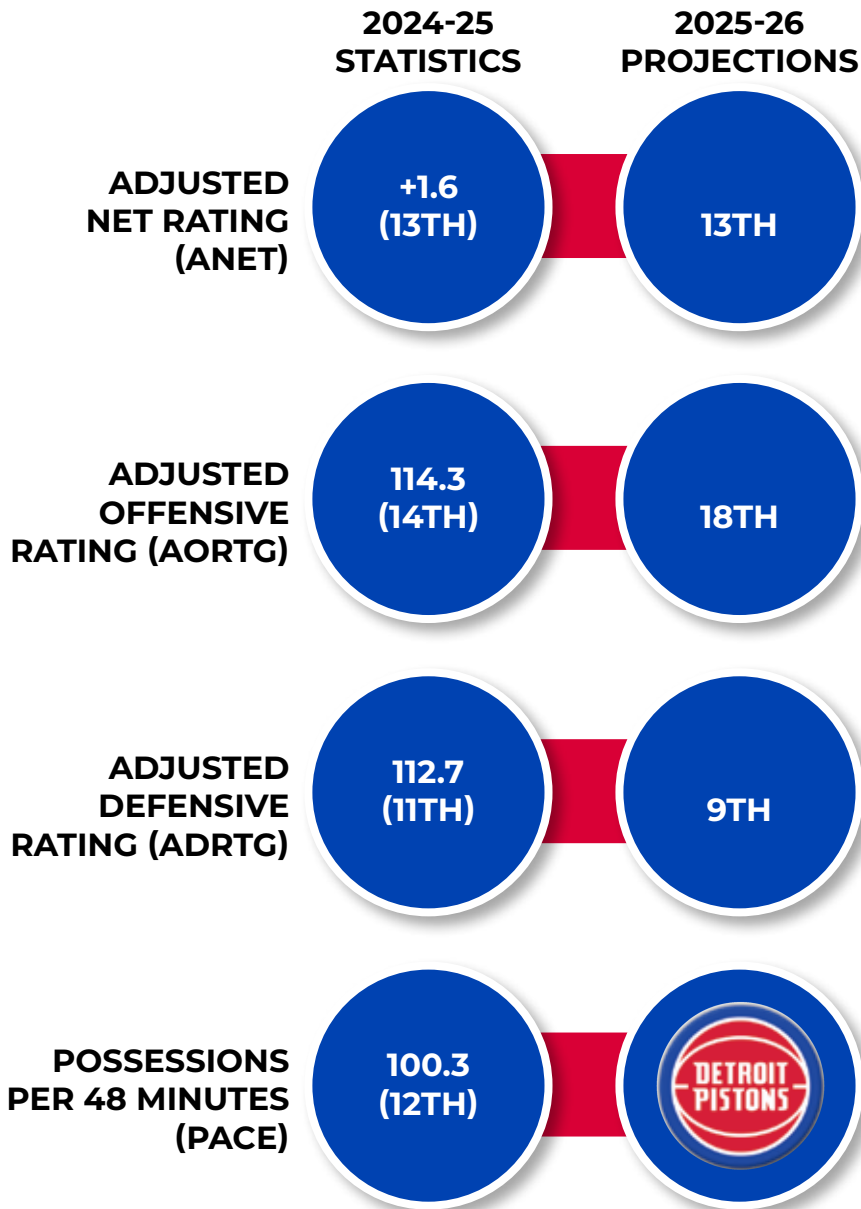
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION	OVER 45.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
70-1	16-1	+650	-425/+320

GOLDEN STATE
WARRIORS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · PACIFIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 54-41 SU & 46-47-2 ATS, 48-47 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99.5
(#12 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

GOLDEN STATE WAS JUST 5-11 SU & ATS VS. PACIFIC DIVISION RIVALS IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Jimmy Butler's arrival on February 8 changed everything for Golden State. Before the trade — which sent Andrew Wiggins, Kyle Anderson, and a protected first to Miami — the Warriors were 25-26 and ranked 21st in offense (112.2 points per 100). With Butler in the lineup, they won 23 of their final 31 games and posted the league's seventh-best offensive rating (119.4). They knocked off second-seeded Houston in the playoffs and were up 1-0 on Minnesota before Stephen Curry's hamstring ended the run.

Butler's 17.9 points per game don't tell the story. His rim pressure, free-throw volume (7.7 attempts), and playmaking (5.9 assists) lifted Curry's burden and gave the Warriors an attacking dimension they sorely lacked.

With Butler, Curry, and Draymond Green back, Golden State should again flirt with top-10 production offensively. Curry remains the sun everything orbits. While he's turning 38 in March,

he averaged 24.5 points and 6.0 assists on 44.8/39.7/93.3 shooting splits last year. The numbers dipped a little with age, but the gear-shifting magic is still there when it matters. Green, turning 36, has also slowed, but his passing, instincts, and competitiveness still elevate everyone around him.

The Warriors also addressed a long-standing need by signing Al Horford. At 39, he'll need his minutes managed, but he's the stretch-five Steve Kerr has been wanting for years. Horford hit at least 41.9% from three in back-to-back seasons before slipping to 36.3% last year, and he's still a clever passer who will thrive in Golden State's read-and-react system.

Depth is a luxury here. Brandin Podziemski, Buddy Hield, and Jonathan Kuminga could all be starters elsewhere. Podziemski handles and shoots, Hield is one of the league's deadliest movement shooters (39.7% career from three), and Kuminga brings elite athleticism. If he sharpens his cutting and improves his jumper a touch, he could be either a long-term building block or a cleaner trade chip after his messy restricted free agency summer.

Beyond that, Kerr can sprinkle in De'Anthony Melton, Gary Payton II, Moses Moody, Trayce Jackson-Davis, Quinten Post, and even Seth Curry in spot minutes. It's a deep, flexible roster.

In Curry, Butler, and Green, Golden State has three basketball savants with diverse skill sets, surrounded by a mix of vets and youth. The biggest obstacle is age. This group is fighting Father Time.

DEFENSE
Butler didn't just balance the offense — he gave Golden State its edge back. After his arrival, the Warriors allowed just 109.9 points per 100 possessions, best in the NBA. His ability to lock down wings freed others to be more aggressive, and after the All-Star break, opponents coughed up 17.6 turnovers per game, more than against any other team.

Green remains an All-Defense pillar, capable of neutralizing bigs, blowing up pick-and-rolls, and letting Kerr toggle between lineups of all sizes. Horford, while not a great rim protector, posted a +1.1 Defensive EPM last season (87th percentile). He positions himself perfectly, rotates on time, and can still switch competently.
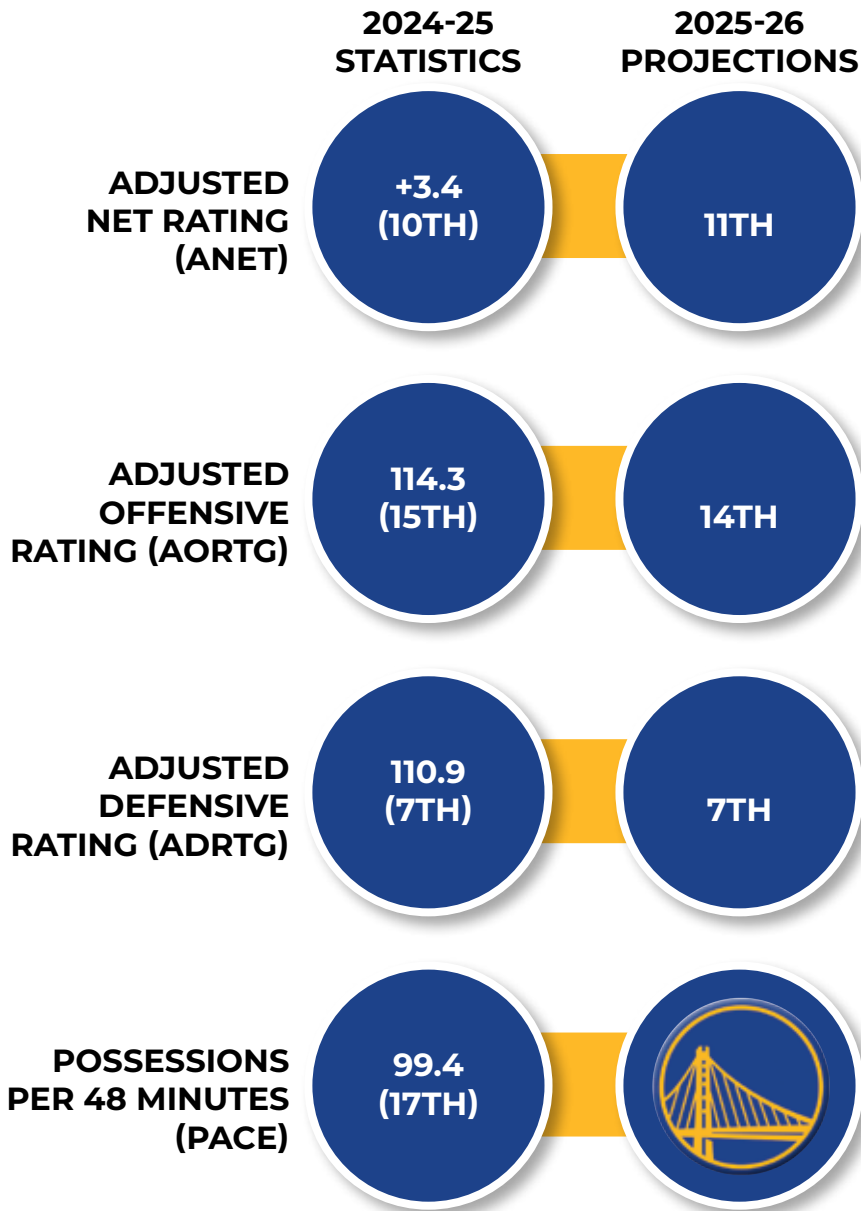
Factor in scrappy bench options like Melton, Payton, and Moody, and the Warriors should comfortably stay in the top-10 defensively.

OUTLOOK
Adding Horford to what Butler brought makes this roster more complete, even if it's graying fast. Kerr has a deep toolbox to lean on if bodies break down. And if any of the stars miss time, Golden State can break the glass in case of emergency and let Kuminga shoulder more of the offense.

This franchise has topped 46 wins in eight of Kerr's 11 seasons. Don't expect it to change now. And GM Mike Dunleavy Jr. is committed to giving Curry another shot at a Western Conference run. If the Warriors are anywhere near the mix at midseason, expect them to be aggressive at the deadline.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+3.4 (10TH)	11TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	114.3 (15TH)	14TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	110.9 (7TH)	7TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	99.4 (17TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   **OVER 45.5**

WIN NBA FINALS
18-1

WIN CONFERENCE
11-1

WIN DIVISION
+240

MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
-320/+245

HOUSTON
ROCKETS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 55-34 SU & 46-41-2 ATS, 47-40-2 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 102.5
(#4 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

HOUSTON BOASTED A 13-3 SU & ATS DIVISIONAL RECORD IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Rockets exceeded expectations last season, finishing second in the West and giving a veteran Golden State squad a good fight in the first round. Their weaknesses were clear: no go-to perimeter scorer and too little shooting (12.7 threes per game, 22nd in the NBA). Houston made a big dent in both issues by landing Kevin Durant for the modest price of Jalen Green, Dillon Brooks, a 2025 first-rounder, and five seconds.

Durant is 37 and past his athletic peak, but he's still one of the most dangerous scorers alive. He averaged 26.6 points on 52.7% from the field and 43.0% from deep last year. He may not attack the rim like he once did, but there's nobody better in the mid-range. When the Rockets need a bucket late in the shot clock, they finally have someone who can deliver. Just dump the ball to Durant in the mid-post and get out of the way.

Unfortunately, the buzz of the Durant deal dimmed when Fred VanVleet tore his ACL in September. He was Houston's leader, its steadiest guard, and one of the few who consistently launched threes (2.7 per game). Losing him doesn't shut the championship window, but it narrows it. That puts pressure on Amen Thompson and Reed Sheppard to open it back up.

Thompson averaged 14.1 points, 8.2 rebounds, and 3.8 assists in his rookie year. He's the league's most explosive athlete, a terror in transition and as a cutter, with enough playmaking to run offense in spurts. Sheppard, the No. 3 pick in 2024, barely played last season but brings a clean shooting stroke and score-first mentality. He hit just 33.8% from three last year but drilled 52.1% at Kentucky. Ime Udoka will need to live with his mistakes to see if he can handle big minutes — and if not, Sheppard could become a trade chip once contracts become movable in December.

Houston also has Alperen Sengun, one of the NBA's best playmaking bigs. He averaged 19.1 points, 10.3 rebounds, and 4.9 assists, last year.

He also showed growth at EuroBasket by hitting threes and averaging 6.6 assists per game. Adding a jumper would ease Houston's spacing concerns, and Durant's presence should make Sengun more efficient by drawing defensive attention elsewhere.

The Rockets also dominated the offensive glass last season (league-best 14.6 per game), and they added Clint Capela to a center group that already featured Sengun and Steven Adams. Second chances will sting even more with Durant on the floor.

Jabari Smith Jr. and Tari Eason should provide more, too. Smith is a reliable floor-spacer (35.4% from deep) and willing gunner. Eason is a relentless athlete who's improving as a shooter but already impacts games cutting, attacking, and crashing the glass. Dorian Finney-Smith, who will miss the start of the season, also gives Houston a veteran wing that is cash from the corners.

The VanVleet injury is a blow, but Durant changes the equation. With him, Houston should push into the top 10 in adjusted offensive rating. And if Sheppard clicks as a lead guard, the ceiling gets higher.

DEFENSE
Don't expect a step back here. The Rockets ranked fourth in adjusted defensive rating (110.1) last season, and while Brooks was a big part of that identity, replacing Green's poor defense and VanVleet's lack of size with more Thompson and Sheppard minutes is likely a net gain. And Durant, often overlooked on this end, still provides length and savvy team defense.

Houston excelled at running shooters off the line last year, allowing just 12.3 made threes per game (second-fewest). Their collective length makes life miserable for drivers, with big bodies waiting to swipe at the ball or contest shots. And Capela joins Sengun and Adams to form a massive interior rotation that limits second-chance points. They're huge at every position.

Thompson is the X-factor. His ability to hound top scorers every night means his teammates can stay home. Having a wing stopper of his caliber changes matchups, especially in the postseason. And any lineups with Thompson, Finney-Smith, and Eason together should be fun. Good luck scoring on that.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+4.8 (6TH)	2ND
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	114.9 (13TH)	6TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	110.1 (4TH)	2ND
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	99.0 (18TH)	

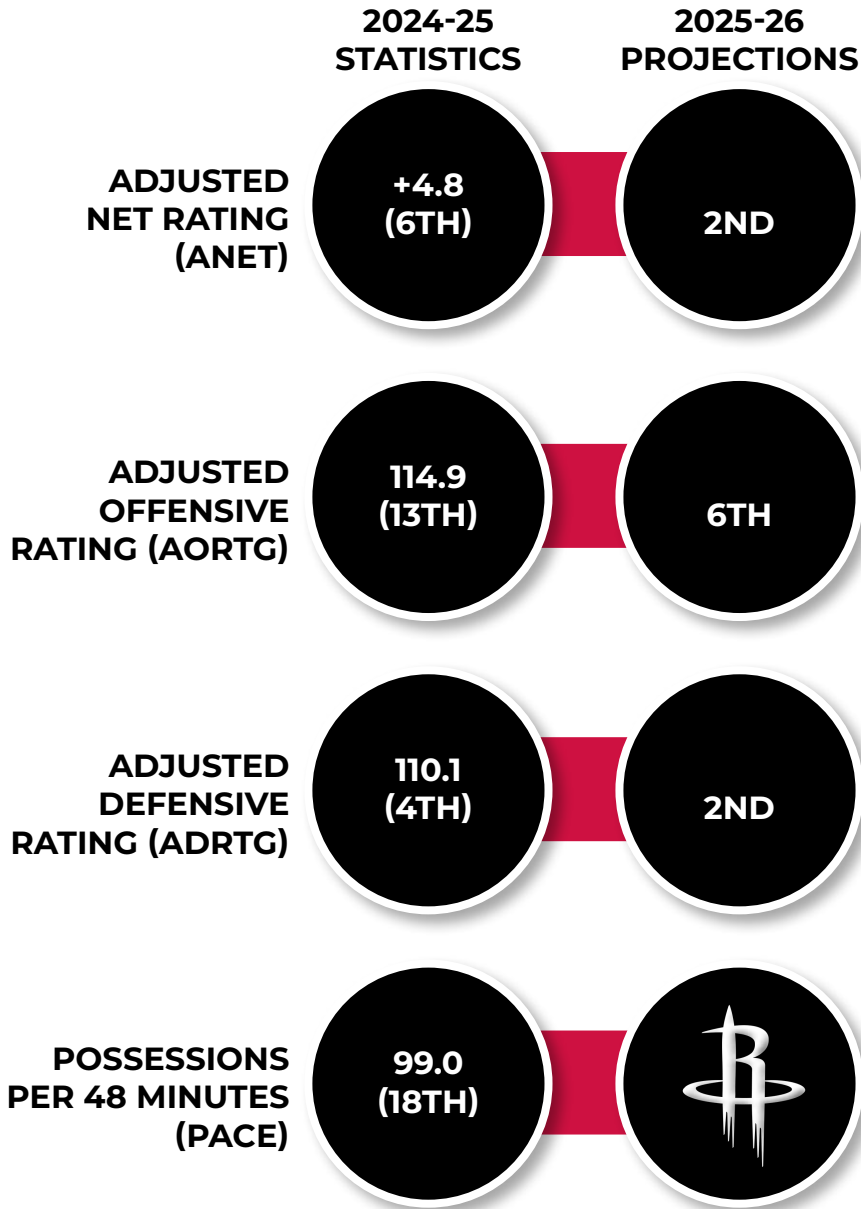*Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com*

OUTLOOK
VanVleet's absence lowers the ceiling, but Houston is still stronger than last year's 52-win squad. The defense should remain elite, and Durant's shotmaking gives them a new gear in crunch time. Hitting 53+ wins feels realistic.

The Rockets sit just below Oklahoma City in the West hierarchy, in the same tier as Denver. They're young, hungry, and have the draft capital to make another splashy move if needed.

If Sheppard breaks out, Houston could be even more dangerous. If not, the front office has ammo to go shopping. Either way, this roster is playoff-ready now — and perhaps title-ready if the right domino falls.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 52.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
10-1	+650	-265	-2000/+850

INDIANA
PACERS

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING   97.5
(#19 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

> **INDIANA WAS 9-1 SU & ATS WHEN PLAYING WITH 3+ DAYS REST LAST SEASON**

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Indiana was one game from an NBA title last year, with Tyrese Haliburton seemingly ready to carry the Pacers to the finish line. In Game 7 in Oklahoma City, he came out firing, hitting three triples in the opening seven minutes.

Then disaster struck. Playing on a bad calf, Haliburton tore his Achilles with 4:55 left in the first quarter. From there, Indiana simply didn't have enough firepower. Because the injury came so late, the Pacers not only watched the Thunder lift the trophy but are also likely facing a lost 2025-26 season without their franchise star.

Indiana's offense is what made the Pacers special — their pace, unselfishness, and balance forced rival front offices to rethink roster building. And Haliburton's vision, passing, and shot creation can't be replaced. He averaged 18.6 points and 9.2 assists on 47.3/38.8/85.1 shooting splits last season, with a +4.9 Offensive EPM that ranked fourth in the league.

To compound things, the Pacers also let Myles Turner walk. His salary was too big for a team no longer contending, but losing a 39.6% shooter from deep at the center spot hurts. Stretch bigs of that caliber are rare.

Down their offensive engine and a floor-spacing big, a steep decline seems inevitable. Still, Rick Carlisle has depth and creativity on his side, and Indiana should be able to field a top-15 offense.

Pascal Siakam will be massive this season. The three-time All-Star averaged 20.2 points, 6.9 rebounds, and 3.4 assists last year, and he got stronger as the playoffs progressed. A skilled scorer who punishes mismatches, Siakam should thrive with an expanded role.

Point guard won't be the black hole you'd expect without Haliburton. Andrew Nembhard would start on plenty of teams. He averaged 13.9 points and 6.9 assists per 40 minutes on just 16.3% usage last year. With his role set to expand, a jump in production should follow. Behind him, T.J. McConnell remains an instant-energy spark. Aaron Nesmith returns at the two as one of the NBA's best three-and-D wings, shooting 43.1% from three last season. And then there's Bennedict Mathurin — the X-factor. He averaged 16.1 points but only took 11.8 shots per game last year. This season, he'll be asked to take 17 or 18. Mathurin has always been more isolation-heavy than Carlisle prefers, but Indiana doesn't have the luxury of holding him back anymore. With his size,

athleticism, and smooth game, he could emerge as a dangerous three-level scorer.

Obi Toppin is a valuable bench piece, a high-flyer who has become a reliable shooter. Younger players like Ben Sheppard, Johnny Furphy, and Jarace Walker will also see more opportunity. Walker, in particular, is intriguing. He's been working to add perimeter skills but will likely get minutes as a small-ball big now that Turner's gone.

The center spot will be filled by committee. Isaiah Jackson provides rim-running and energy. Jay Huff is a stretch five who can sometimes throw down highlight dunks. Tony Bradley is a serviceable, no-nonsense player that did his job in the postseason. James Wiseman has expanded his range and is a big body around the basket. None can replace what Turner did. But like Billy Beane, Kevin Pritchard might have been able to "recreate him in the aggregate."

Haliburton's absence is a gut punch, but this can still be a tough group to guard. And a Mathurin breakout could give fans in the Hoosier State some life — making things palatable in the short term and offering hope for a return to contention down the road.

DEFENSE

The Pacers might not regress much defensively — in fact, they could get better. Turner's reputation as a rim protector exceeds his actual impact these days, and he's not the same covering in space. Haliburton, meanwhile, was the weakest defender in the rotation. Removing him helps raise the floor of the entire group.

A starting backcourt of Nembhard and Nesmith gives Indiana one of the league's better defensive duos. Both can guard the ball and switch across multiple assignments. At the forward spots, Carlisle will always have length and athleticism to lean on. Walker could earn serious time if his offense allows, because his defense is a major positive.

At center, Jackson, Huff, and Bradley all bring something useful defensively. Jackson was on his way to becoming a real game-wrecker before tearing his Achilles last November.

Indiana already had positive defensive markers last year, tied for fifth in threes allowed (12.9 per game) and top-10 in opponent turnovers (15.0 per game). They contest well and punish lazy ball movement. That identity should carry over.
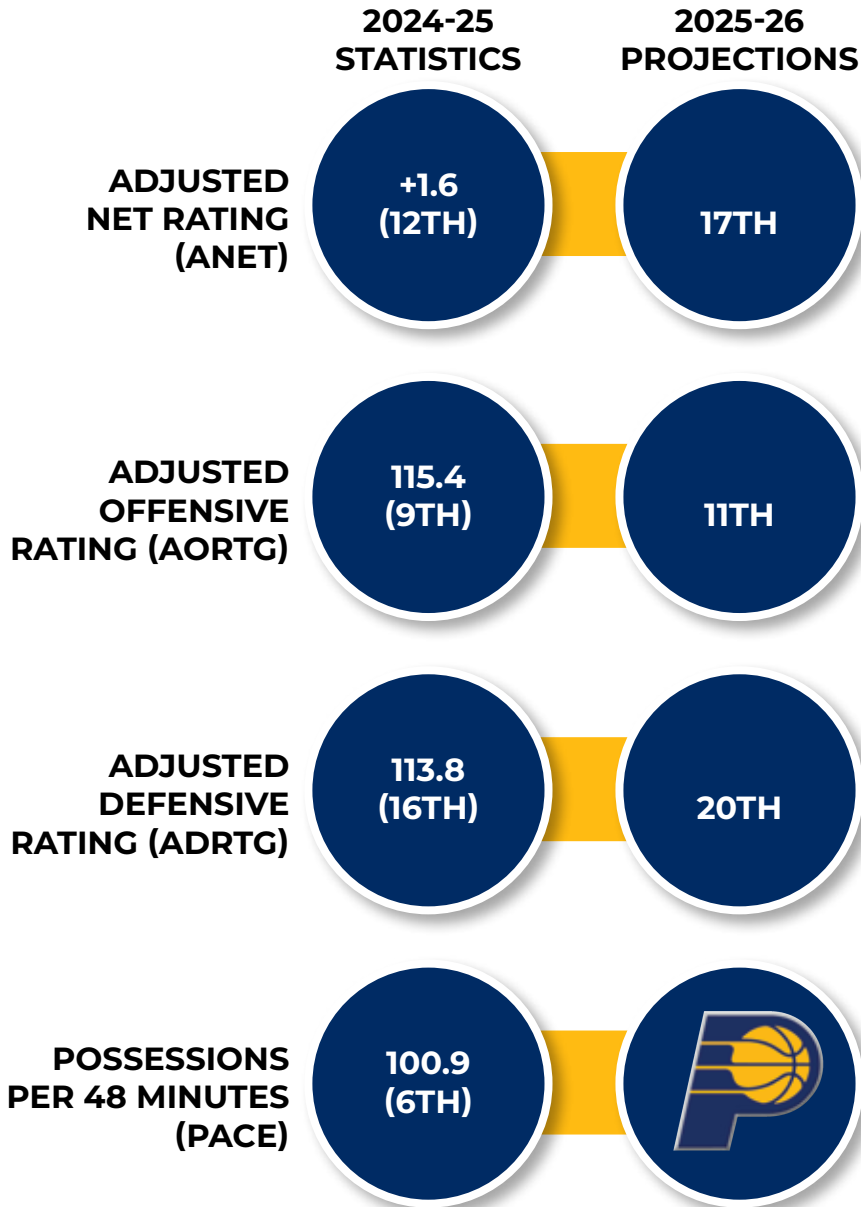
OUTLOOK

It's a shame the Pacers won't contend in 2025-26. Their playoff run was one of the stories of the season, and they were close to capping it with a championship. Without Haliburton — and with Turner gone — that dream is on the backburner.

But don't count them out entirely. Carlisle still has a deep, versatile roster. A 40-win season is very realistic, and at plus-money odds, Indiana to make the playoffs isn't a bad wager.

There's also value in the awards market. Nembhard and Mathurin will both see major usage spikes, making them intriguing candidates for Most Improved Player.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+1.6 (12TH)	17TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	115.4 (9TH)	11TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	113.8 (16TH)	20TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.9 (6TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 37.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	**WIN CONFERENCE**	**WIN DIVISION**	**MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS**
130-1	30-1	40-1	+120/-145

LOS ANGELES
CLIPPERS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · PACIFIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 53-36 SU & 50-39 ATS, 43-45-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 100.5
(#8 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

LA CLIPPERS WERE 32-12 SU & 29-15 ATS IN THEIR FIRST SEASON AT THE INTUIT DOME

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Clippers were embarrassed in the postseason, essentially no-showing a Game 7 in Denver. Still, the year wasn't a total loss. Kawhi Leonard was the big question mark after missing the end of the 2023-24 with a knee injury that also cost him the Olympics. By managing him carefully, Los Angeles got him back to playing like his superstar self. Leonard averaged 21.5 points, 5.9 boards, and 3.1 assists on 49.8/41.1/81.0 splits during the regular season — and he was even better in the playoffs, putting up 25.0, 7.6, and 4.7 on 53.7% shooting against the Nuggets.

The fact that Leonard was healthy and thriving late in the year fuels optimism for 2025-26. He had a full summer of unrestricted work on his body and game, which means the Clippers can again lean on one of the league's most efficient three-level scorers — unless Pablo Torre finds out a way to take him down.

James Harden returns as Leonard's co-star. At 36, his postseason struggles remain, but he still averaged 22.8 points, 8.7 assists, and 5.8 rebounds in the regular season. His partnership with Ivica Zubac is central to Tyronn Lue's offense. Zubac averaged 16.8 and 12.6 last year, finishing everything Harden dropped off and dominating as a roller.

Two new faces, Bradley Beal and John Collins, give the starting group even more punch. Beal was redundant with Devin Booker in Phoenix, but he still shot 49.7% from the field and 38.6%

from three. Collins quietly had a strong year in Utah, hitting nearly 40% from deep and posting positive advanced metrics on a 17-win team. He can pop or roll, giving Harden and Leonard another versatile teammate in the frontcourt.

The bench might be the deepest in basketball. Kris Dunn, Derrick Jones Jr., Nicolas Batum, and Bogdan Bogdanovic all return. Jones is now respectable from three and remains an elite athlete. Batum spaces the floor and makes smart decisions. Bogdanovic is a proven scorer who can give second units hell.

The Clippers also added two big-time veterans: Chris Paul and Brook Lopez. Paul, one of the best players in franchise history, averaged 8.8 points and 7.4 assists with San Antonio. He's still one of the smartest players alive and will steady bench groups. Lopez remains one of the best floor-spacing fives in the league, hitting nearly two threes per game in each of the past three seasons. Between Zubac and Lopez, Lue will always have a quality center on the floor.

The only real threat to this offense is a Leonard injury, which is why the Clippers will keep managing him — no matter how much it annoys old-school fans. If Lue can make Beal and Lopez comfortable early, this team should be lights out offensively. They shot 37.3% from deep last year (7th in the NBA), and this roster might shoot it even better.

DEFENSE
Los Angeles is still one of the league's toughest defenses. Leonard remains a high-level wing stopper, Zubac was a Defensive Player of the Year candidate last season, and both Dunn and Jones bring intense on-ball pressure on the perimeter. Jones is also a dangerous weak-side shot-blocker.

The Clippers finished second in aDRTG (109.2) and third in points allowed per 100 possessions (110.5). They forced 15.0 turnovers per game (10th) and held opponents to 35.5% from three (5th). The priority now is shoring up their rim defense — they allowed 68.2% shooting at the basket last season. Collins and Lopez should provide some help there.

The wild card is integrating Beal and Paul without losing some edge. If Lue can balance rotations and cover for their shortcomings, this group should remain an elite defense.
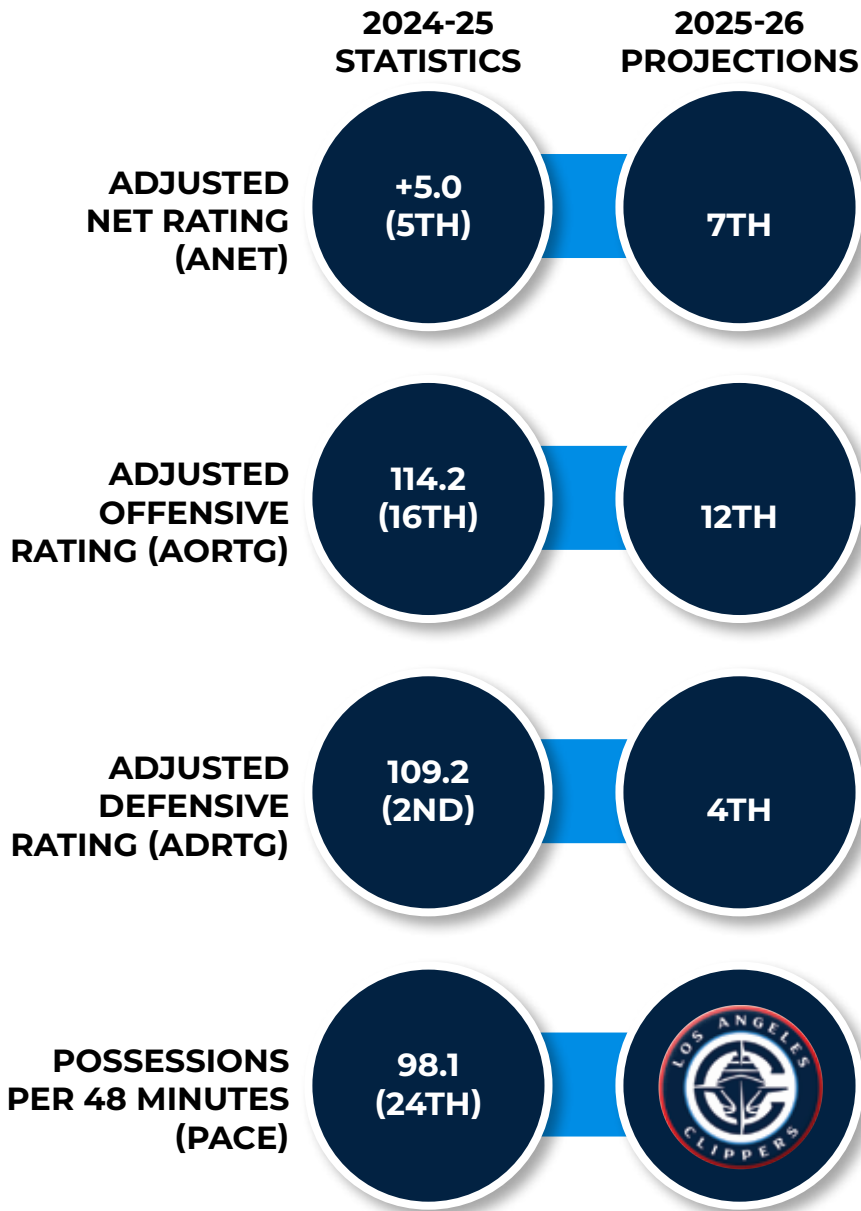
OUTLOOK
The Clippers won 51 games in 2023-24 and 50 in 2024-25, yet their win total is set at 47.5. It's puzzling given this is probably the deepest, most talented roster Lue has had.

If they don't win at least 48, something went seriously wrong. Of course, with this group, that's always on the table. These players have Charmin Ultra Soft body tissue. But with Leonard, Harden, Zubac, and a stacked bench, the Over feels like the right side.

If not for playoff trust issues, the Clippers would be in the conversation with Oklahoma City, Denver, and Houston. They're that good on paper.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+5.0 (5TH)	7TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	114.2 (16TH)	12TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	109.2 (2ND)	4TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.1 (24TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 47.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
20-1	13-1	+180	-400/+300

LOS ANGELES
LAKERS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · PACIFIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 51-36 SU & 46-39-2 ATS, 43-44 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 100.5
(#9 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

> **LA LAKERS POSTED IMPRESSIVE 12-4 SU & 13-3 ATS MARK IN DIVISIONAL GAMES LAST SEASON**

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The internet nearly broke when news dropped that the Lakers had traded Anthony Davis, Max Christie, and a 2029 first for Luka Doncic. In Dallas, fans wanted Nico Harrison's head on a stick. In L.A., Rob Pelinka was being paraded down Figueroa.

Now Luka is the face of the franchise, and Pelinka's challenge is threading the needle — putting together a roster that matches both Luka's long-term timeline and LeBron James' short-term window. JJ Redick, in his second year on the sidelines, will do everything possible to make sure this group competes immediately.

On this end of the floor, Luka, LeBron, and Austin Reaves make up a dangerous trio. In 50 combined games between Dallas and Los Angeles last year, Luka averaged 28.2 points, 8.2 boards, and 7.7 assists. He might be the most productive offensive engine in the sport, equal parts point guard and scoring wing, with an off-the-dribble three, bully-ball drives, and crafty finishes. He's also in his best shape in years, so MVP buzz is already swirling. LeBron, somehow still explosive at 41 in December, can still go for 25-8-8 with deep shooting, mid-post scoring, and downhill rim attacks. Reaves continues to blossom, coming off a season of 20.2 points and 5.8 assists on 46.0/37.7/87.7 splits. He's got a clean jumper, real off-the-bounce juice, and the ability to score at all three levels.

That core already showed promise. Together, Luka, LeBron, and Reaves scored 121.6 points per 100 possessions last year. Now it's about finding the right complementary pieces.

There's reason for optimism with the perimeter role players. Marcus Smart, Jake LaRavia, Rui Hachimura, Dalton Knecht, and Gabe Vincent can all play. Smart is the wild card. He knocked down 39.2% of his threes in Washington but just 32.2% in Memphis, and he hasn't cleared 35% in six straight years. If the shot is there, he could actually make sense as a starter. LaRavia is a big wing who runs the floor, cuts hard, and has the athleticism to finish plays. Hachimura has quietly become one of the league's better spot-up shooters, hitting at least 41.3% from deep the past two years, while also providing closeout

attacking and some mid-range polish. Knecht and Vincent are meant to stretch defenses, though the former disappeared after a blistering start to his rookie season and the latter has been extremely disappointing since coming over from Miami.

Pelinka also landed Deandre Ayton as the new starting center. He averaged 14.4 and 10.2 in Portland but hasn't posted a positive Offensive EPM since 2022. At 27, there's still time for him to turn his career around, and he'll get every opportunity here. The blueprint is simple: finish plays, avoid bad shots, and bring consistent effort. Even if he never looks like the player he was in Phoenix, he's still an upgrade over last year's carousel of Jaxson Hayes, Maxi Kleber, and Jarred Vanderbilt.

Redick has his work cut out managing rotations and egos, but his emphasis on spacing and positionless basketball fits well around Luka and LeBron. If Ayton clicks, Los Angeles will be very tough to stop.

DEFENSE
The problem is obvious. Luka, LeBron, and Reaves lit up opponents offensively but got lit up themselves — allowing 120.3 points per 100 possessions. That's why their net rating together barely scraped +1.3.

At this stage, LeBron just isn't a plus defender anymore, which leaves all three stars as negatives on that end. That's why there's some noise about Smart starting, even if it means pushing Reaves to a sixth-man role. Realistically, that feels unlikely; Reaves has earned the right to start.

If the Lakers start Luka–Reaves–LeBron–Hachimura–Ayton, they'll struggle in a big way. Ayton was once a solid rim protector, but it's been a while. Without him rediscovering that form, that lineup features five questionable defenders. The bench doesn't offer much relief either.

Defense killed the Lakers against Minnesota last spring, with the Wolves torching them night after night. It'll be on Redick to make sure the same flaws don't define an entire season.
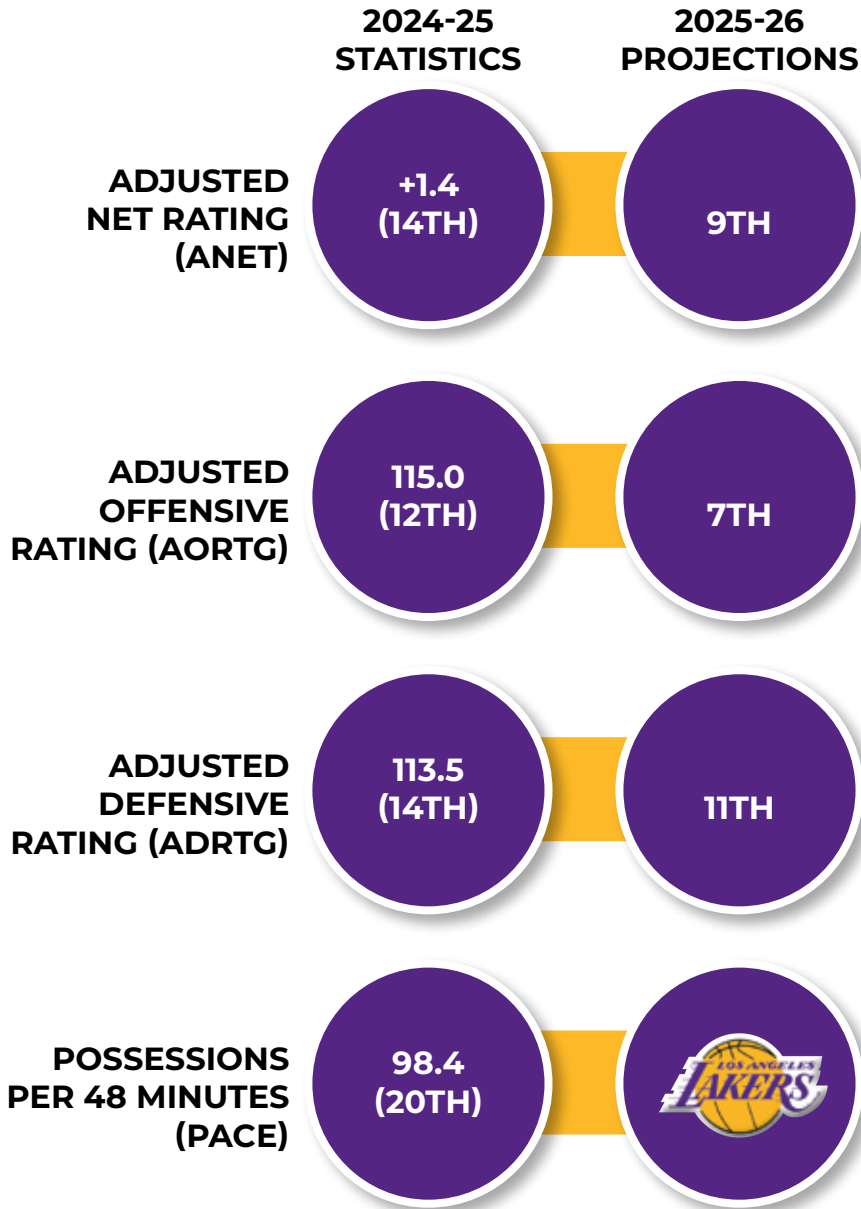
OUTLOOK
Having Luka and LeBron on the same team should mean success. They're too skilled and too versatile to fail offensively. But defense is an important piece of the puzzle, and Pelinka hasn't quite nailed the build around his star duo.

Long term, the mission is clear: preserve flexibility and maximize Luka's prime, even if it means waiting out LeBron's exit. But in the present, expectations are sky-high, and that sets the stage for a beautiful disaster.

There's also the injury factor. LeBron is a prime candidate to miss time, and Bronny isn't ready to fill the GOAT's shoes when that happens.

If Ayton looks like the guy from Phoenix's Finals run, maybe this team flirts with 50 wins. But that's a big "if" for a player teetering on journeyman status. More likely, the Lakers are a top-5 offense paired with a bottom-tier defense — and that math rarely works out in the West.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+1.4 (14TH)	9TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	115.0 (12TH)	7TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	113.5 (14TH)	11TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.4 (20TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   UNDER 49.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
14-1	+950	+155	-330/+255

MEMPHIS
GRIZZLIES

WESTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 49-39 SU & 45-42-1 ATS, 49-39 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 97.5
(#18 of 30)

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Grizzlies fired Taylor Jenkins in March after defensive struggles and reported tension inside the organization. Locker-room spats didn't help, and Jenkins clashed with GM Zach Kleiman on philosophy. Kleiman turned to Tuomas Iisalo, the Paris Basketball coach known for his offensive creativity. Initially brought in as an assistant to rework the offense, Iisalo showed enough as interim head coach for Kleiman to remove the tag.

One of Memphis' organizational goals last year was to become less heliocentric — reducing Ja Morant's heavy on-ball load while empowering others to create. That diversification worked statistically: the Grizzlies ranked fifth in adjusted offensive rating (117.1) and played at the league's fastest pace (103.7). But Morant wasn't thrilled with how little the ball was in his hands. The offense didn't feature enough pick-and-rolls, neutralizing one of the game's most explosive drivers. Jenkins tried to adjust, but the damage was done.

Iisalo's system should be the compromise. His Paris teams thrived in transition and ran plenty of pick-and-rolls — often initiated with high ball screens. Once Zach Edey returns from ankle surgery, he'll be a massive screener carving out space for Morant. Just as important, Iisalo's sets involve off-ball movement around the main action. That means Morant gets his pick-and-rolls, but teammates are actively relocating, clearing space, or even running secondary actions. It's all designed to manipulate the floor for open lanes and better spacing.

Morant, who averaged 23.2 points and 7.3 assists, should thrive. He'll be unleashed in transition and set up to attack in the half court. The challenge will be staying on the floor — he hasn't played 65+ games since his rookie season — and improving on last year's 30.9% from three.

Jaren Jackson Jr., sidelined briefly with a toe injury, also fits perfectly. He shot 37.5% from three and will get clean pick-and-pop looks, plus space to attack closeouts with floaters or finishes.

The big loss is Desmond Bane, dealt to Orlando after averaging 19.2 points and 2.4 threes per game. Memphis believes it can replace much of his production with Jaylen Wells, Ty Jerome, and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope. Wells was steady as a rookie, averaging 10.4 points on 35.2% from deep. Jerome nearly won Sixth Man of the Year, averaging 12.5 points and 3.4 assists on 51.6/43.9/87.2 shooting splits for Cleveland, and his on-ball numbers without Donovan Mitchell

suggest untapped upside. Caldwell-Pope struggled in Orlando's clunky offense (34.2% from deep) but is a career 36.7% shooter who should bounce back.

Santi Aldama, Cedric Coward, and Edey are also key. Aldama averaged 12.5 points and hit 36.8% from three on high volume, earning a $52.5 million extension as part of the long-term core. Coward, a big wing Memphis has long coveted, brings shooting and a mid-post game without needing many touches. Edey averaged 9.2 points and 8.3 rebounds, but looked far better once paired with Morant in pick-and-rolls. His size and soft touch make him a tough cover, and there's even hope he develops a jumper.

Beyond that, Memphis has plenty of youth and depth. Vince Williams, John Konchar, GG Jackson, and Cam Spencer can all contribute. Scotty Pippen Jr. could even force his way into a starting role with his playmaking and crafty scoring. Brandon Clarke's eventual return from a knee injury would add an energetic finisher, rebounder, and short-roll passer. Iisalo's teams normally crash the glass hard, so he'll be hoping Clarke and Edey help there.

Without Bane, there's some doubt this group can be top-10 offensively. But the mix of Morant, Jackson, shooting at the two-guard spot, and Iisalo's system suggests otherwise. If healthy, this team can still be one of the league's tougher covers.

DEFENSE
Jenkins' dismissal was ultimately about defense. Through January 15, Memphis was fifth in points allowed per 100 possessions (110.2). From then on, they slipped to 19th (116.3), becoming far too beatable.

Iisalo's defensive vision emphasizes pressure: picking up full court, sticking to assignments in transition, and shrinking the floor in half-court settings. Execution will be tricky, especially with Morant's inconsistent on-ball defense and Edey's slow feet. But help is there. Pippen Jr. brings energy at the point of attack, Jackson remains an elite rim protector who can cover ground, and Iisalo's drop coverage could hide Edey's limitations.

Losing Bane actually helps a little on this end. Wells, Caldwell-Pope, and Coward should all be stronger defenders.
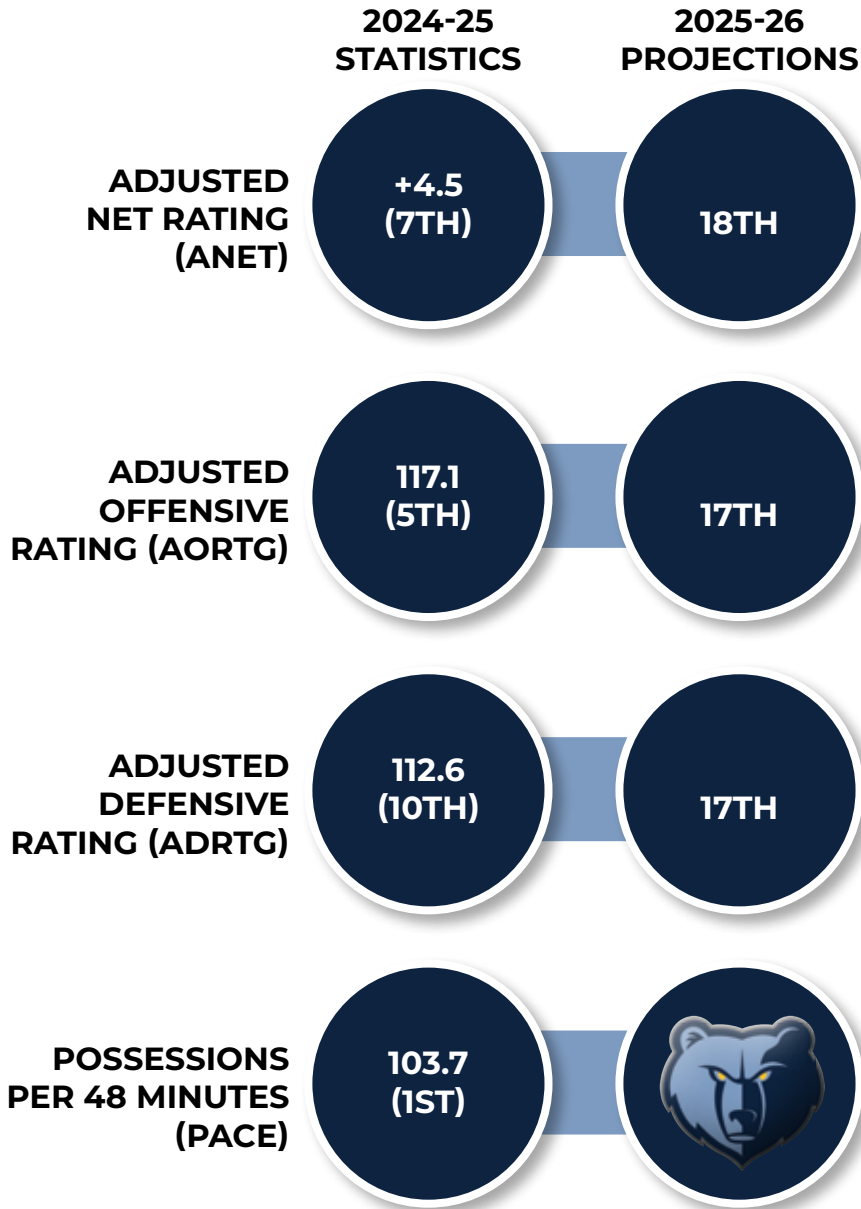
Memphis probably won't get back to the top 10 defensively, but reaching league-average is realistic. With fewer breakdowns and a more coherent scheme, that should be the target.

OUTLOOK
The Grizzlies will look different without Jenkins and Bane, but expectations shouldn't crater. When Morant and Jackson are healthy, this team wins games. And the Bane replacement committee of Jerome, Caldwell-Pope, and Coward is better than most realize.

This roster still profiles as top-10 offensively and top-15 defensively, which translates to 40+ wins. With better injury luck, Memphis could push 45+ and emerge as the best of the West's non-contenders. The sky isn't falling.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+4.5 (7TH)	18TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	117.1 (5TH)	17TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	112.6 (10TH)	17TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	103.7 (1ST)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 39.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
200-1	130-1	15-1	+160/-200

MIAMI
HEAT

EASTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHEAST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 39-49 SU & 41-45-2 ATS, 48-39-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 96.5
(#20 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

MIAMI WAS 26-16-1 OVER THE TOTAL IN 43 HOME GAMES IN THE '24-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Erik Spoelstra is one of the sharpest basketball minds on the planet, but his Heat teams have gone cold offensively. Miami has finished outside the top 20 in adjusted offensive rating three straight years, and breaking that trend will be a challenge.

The Heat actually shot the ball well from deep last season (36.7%) but were only 16th in attempts (37.3 per game). They also ranked 25th in rim frequency (28.3%) and took the fourth-fewest free throws per game (20.2). Instead, they leaned heavily on the mid-range, ranking 10th in frequency (31.7%). It's a shot profile badly in need of modernization, but so far, talk of change hasn't materialized. Miami played at 97.2 possessions per 48 minutes last season — barely faster than the year before — and the shot diet looked the same.

Tyler Herro is trying to push things forward. He averaged a career-high 23.9 points and 5.5 assists, while upping his threes to 8.7 per game. But foot surgery will sideline him for at least the first month of the season, leaving Miami in a tough spot early.

Bam Adebayo's offense remains an issue. He settles for too many inefficient mid-range jumpers. Only six players attempted more 10–14 foot shots per game than Adebayo's 3.1, and all six converted at a higher rate than his 43.3%. He also shot just 41.3% on 5–9 foot attempts. If he's going to remain an offensive hub, his shot selection must improve.

The addition of Norman Powell should help. The veteran averaged a career-best 21.8 points with the Clippers while shooting 41.8% from three on 7.1 attempts. Powell also brings downhill pressure, able to finish at the rim and draw fouls — something Miami sorely lacked.

Development from Nikola Jovic and Kel'el Ware is another key. Jovic showed flashes of being a floor-spacing big with off-the-dribble potential, averaging 10.7 points on 45.6/37.1/82.8 splits. He needs consistency, though his strong EuroBasket stint for Serbia suggests a leap could be coming. Miami seems to agree, as the team locked him

down with an extension right before the season. Ware, drafted as a stretch big, shot just 31.5% from deep as a rookie. If he pushes that to 35%, he'll play more next to Adebayo. That frontcourt pairing had strong metrics last season.

Growth from Pelle Larsson and Jaime Jaquez Jr. would also help. Larsson impressed as a rookie three-and-D wing, while Jaquez struggled through a sophomore slump. Both are rotation wild cards.

Finally, Davion Mitchell and Andrew Wiggins are players that did well for the Heat last year, and they might have more to give. Mitchell is a steady shooter and playmaker, while Wiggins — who has 20-point scoring talent — might benefit from a full summer dose of "Heat Culture."

With Powell's rim pressure, Herro's shooting, and potential growth from the supporting cast, a climb into the top 15 offensively isn't out of the question. But given the roster makeup and reliance on mid-range-heavy stars, there's not much ceiling here.

DEFENSE
Defense is where Miami thrives. The Heat have finished top-10 in adjusted defensive rating in each of the last five years, and that shouldn't change in 2025-26.

Butler may be gone, but the team replaced him with Wiggins, a plus-level wing defender. They also added Mitchell, a gritty point-of-attack pest nicknamed "Off Night." Adebayo remains the defensive centerpiece, capable of anchoring the paint while switching onto guards — versatility that has earned him five All-Defensive selections.

Ware looms as the X-factor. Spoelstra wants him on the court for his rim protection, and the numbers back it up: lineups with Ware and Adebayo gave up only 110.4 points per 100 possessions last season (85th percentile per Cleaning The Glass). Adebayo prefers guarding fours, Ware protects the rim, and together they're suffocating.

Like a good rug, Spoelstra's aggressive system will tie the whole room together — forcing turnovers, scrambling to disrupt stars, and contesting shots. If Ware can handle heavier minutes, Miami should also improve on the glass, where they ranked just 20th in rebound rate (49.6%).
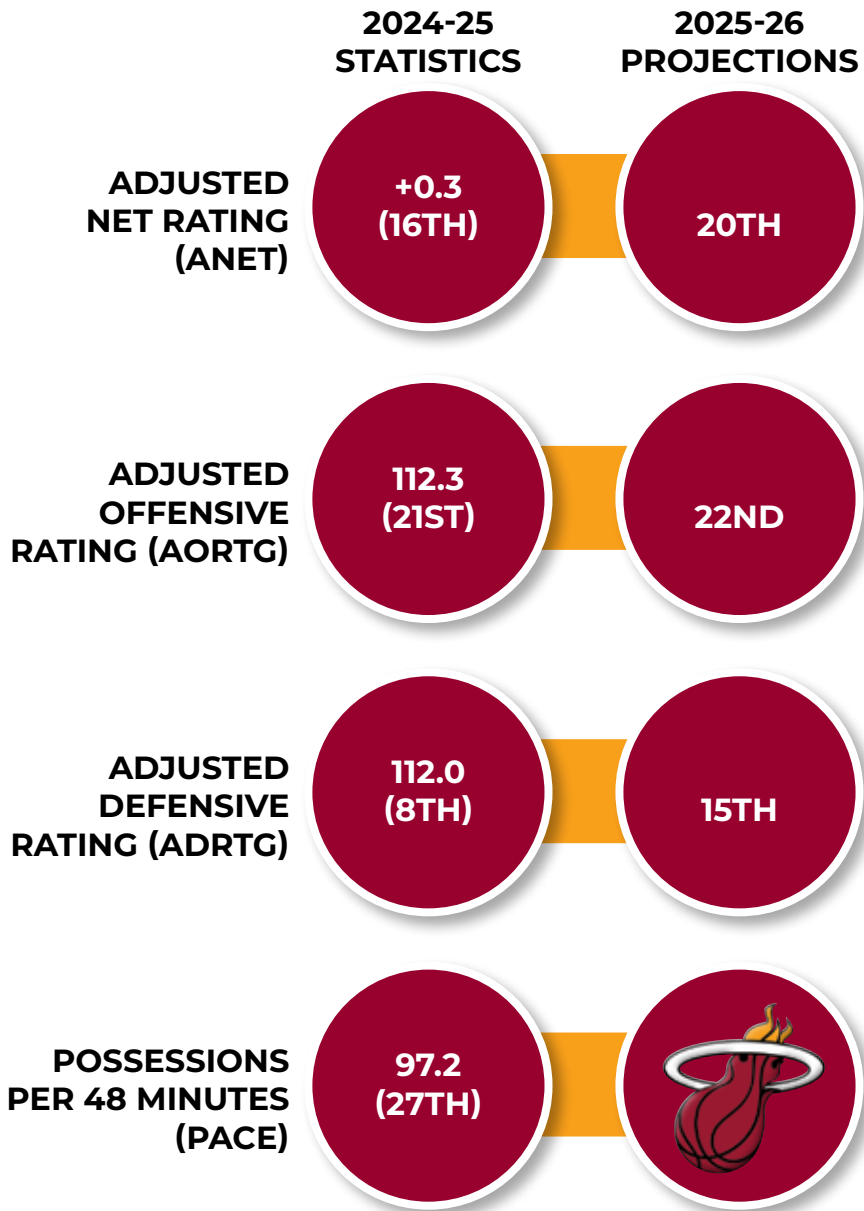
OUTLOOK
The Heat's championship window looks closed. Riley and Spoelstra always chase stars, but Miami has stopped short of going all-in, and the roster reflects it. A successful season now means making the playoffs — a sharp comedown for a franchise that spent over a decade in the East's spotlight.

That said, the floor is high. Continuity, competitiveness, and Spoelstra's leadership matter, especially in a weak conference. Miami has topped 36 wins in each of Spoelstra's 17 seasons, and with the win total set at 36.5, history leans in one direction.

The biggest risk is Herro's recovery dragging longer than expected. But in a league where plenty of teams don't mind losing, Miami's refusal to tank makes the Over the more appealing side.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+0.3 (16TH)	20TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	112.3 (21ST)	22ND
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	112.0 (8TH)	15TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	97.2 (27TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   **OVER 36.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
250-1	50-1	18-1	+150/-190

MILWAUKEE
BUCKS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · CENTRAL DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 50-38 SU & 45-40-3 ATS, 46-41-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99.0
(#15 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

MILWAUKEE WAS JUST 4-11 ATS PLAYING ON THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK DAYS LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Damian Lillard trade didn't work out the way Milwaukee hoped. The idea was that pairing Lillard with Giannis Antetokounmpo would reopen the championship window. But the two-man game never fully clicked, injuries kept stalling progress, and Lillard's torn Achilles in the first round against Indiana was the final blow. The Bucks used the stretch provision to move off his contract, creating the cap space to sign Myles Turner away from the Pacers.

That pivot made it clear: the Bucks are all in on "Point Giannis." Late last season, with Lillard sidelined by a blood clot, Milwaukee got hot by rolling the ball to Giannis and surrounding him with shooters.

After the All-Star break, the Bucks went 19-10 with the league's eighth-best raw offensive rating (117.9). That gave GM Jon Horst a vision: swap out Brook Lopez for Turner and run everything through Giannis.

Turner was once defined by his defense, but at this stage he's arguably better on offense. His Defensive EPM peaked at +3.0 back in 2019, but it has hovered near neutral since. Offensively, though, he's been trending up. Two years ago he posted a +2.0 Offensive EPM, and last season he had a career year as a shooter — 2.2 threes per game on 39.6% from deep, at 5.5 attempts per night.

Going from Lopez to Turner should be seamless. Both are strong pick-and-pop threats, but Turner offers more variety and upside.

Beyond Giannis and Turner, the starting lineup is less clear. Options include AJ Green, Gary Trent

Jr., Kevin Porter Jr., Kyle Kuzma, and Taurean Prince — the group that held things together late last season.

Green might have the inside track on one of the spots. He shot 42.7% from three, and lineups with him and Giannis scored 123.9 points per 100 possessions. Trent is another pure floor spacer, something you can't have too much of around Giannis. Porter offers on-ball creation that Doc Rivers may value. Kuzma and Prince both slot in as stretch fours, though Kuzma tends to freelance while Prince embraces a defined role — which could make him the safer fit.

Off the bench, Bobby Portis and Cole Anthony will add some punch. Portis is a fearless scorer who thrives on confidence and can hurt defenses inside or out. Anthony is a shifty creator who should benefit from Milwaukee's spacing; if not, Ryan Rollins is another option with juice.

Keep an eye on Amir Coffey and Andre Jackson Jr. too. Coffey shot 40.9% from deep with the Clippers and adds versatility on the wing. Jackson's jumper remains shaky, but he's an elite athlete with great feel — the kind of connective piece good teams need.

The concept works: Giannis averaged 30.4 points, 11.9 rebounds, and 6.5 assists last season. Surrounded by shooting, he'll put up MVP-caliber numbers again and keep Milwaukee operating like a borderline top-10 offense. The question is whether that's enough.

DEFENSE

The offense should be strong, but defense is the real question. After the All-Star break, Milwaukee's raw defensive rating was 113.4 — roughly league average. Swapping Lopez for Turner should help. Lopez was pushing 40 and was no longer able to guard in space. Turner isn't what he once was, but he's still mobile enough to provide more resistance.

With Giannis and Turner, the Bucks will have two intimidating rim protectors. But perimeter defense is a glaring weakness. Of the rotation players mentioned above, only Jackson really digs in. That makes it too easy for opponents to get to the rim in the first place.

Rivers, however, is an asset here. For all his critics, he simplifies things defensively and consistently produces above-average results.
The Bucks should be fine in the regular season. The postseason is another matter, when weak defenders are relentlessly targeted.
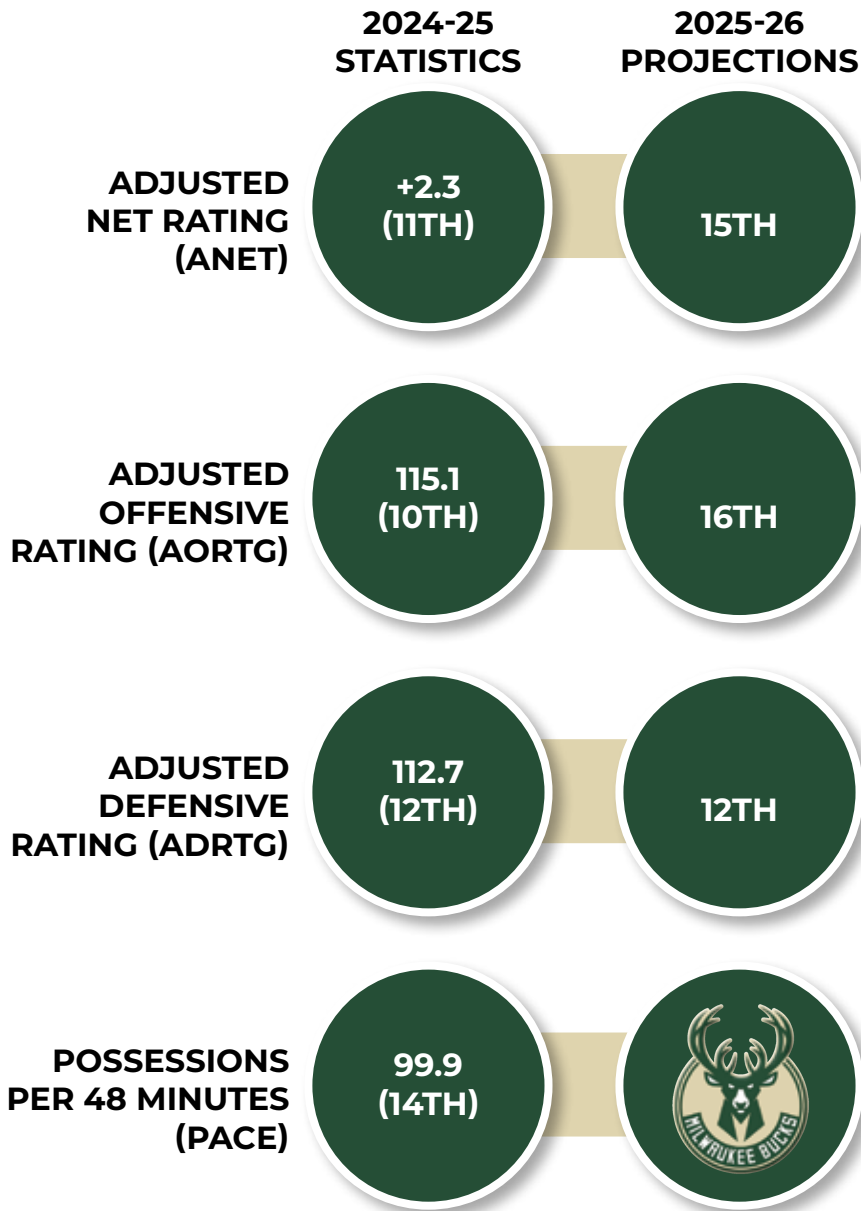
OUTLOOK

Giannis' future looms over everything. If the Bucks don't improve, he could push for a trade. And Milwaukee might even decide to explore moving him if building a winner around a top-five player proves impossible. That's why hypothetical Giannis trades flood the internet.

For now, though, this looks like a borderline playoff team in a weak Eastern Conference. That makes the Over on 42.5 wins appealing, and grabbing plus-money on 45+ wins could also be smart.

Whether this team can compete with Cleveland, New York, or Orlando is another story. That probably requires another move — and the Bucks are short on assets.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+2.3 (11TH)	15TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	115.1 (10TH)	16TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	112.7 (12TH)	12TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	99.9 (14TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   OVER 42.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
50-1	14-1	10-1	-310/+240

MINNESOTA
TIMBERWOLVES

WESTERN CONFERENCE · NORTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 58-39 SU & 48-48-1 ATS, 52-45 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 101.0
(#6 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

MINNESOTA WAS 30-18 OVER THE TOTAL IN HOME GAMES IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Just before the start of the 2024-25 season, Minnesota traded Karl-Anthony Towns to New York for Julius Randle, Donte DiVincenzo, and a pick. Many saw it as a cost-cutting move — and maybe it was — but president of basketball operations Tim Connelly knew exactly what he was getting.

Replacing Towns, the second-leading scorer in franchise history, was no small task. He averaged 21.8 points and 8.3 rebounds in 2023-24, made four All-Star Games, and while his "greatest big man shooter" claim drew laughs, his career 40.0% mark from three does a decent job of backing it up. Losing that kind of floor spacing raised fair concerns.

Early returns weren't pretty. In their first 19 games, the Wolves scored just 113.2 points per 100 possessions, Randle and DiVincenzo struggled to find their fit, and the offense looked clunky.

But Chris Finch adjusted. From December 1 through the end of the season, Minnesota scored 117.9 points per 100 possessions — seventh-best in the league.

Anthony Edwards shouldered more of the perimeter load and blossomed as a shooter. He hit 4.1 threes per game on 39.5% shooting, leading the NBA with 320 made triples. Around him, Naz Reid, DiVincenzo, Nickeil Alexander-Walker, and Mike Conley all shot at least 37.9% from deep. Randle and Jaden McDaniels did their part in spacing the floor, too.

The Wolves finished fifth in makes (15.0 per game) and fourth in percentage (37.7%), improving from 12.6 makes per game the prior season.

Beyond the shooting, Randle gave Minnesota something Towns didn't: a true No. 2 shot creator. His downhill force, physicality, and tough shot-

making took pressure off Edwards and helped the team win two playoff series.

Looking ahead, there's no reason Minnesota can't rank top-10 in offensive efficiency again. Alexander-Walker is gone, but the Wolves believe Rob Dillingham and Terrence Shannon Jr. can cover that ground. Shannon, in particular, looks like a fit: athletic, explosive in transition, improving as a shooter, and tailor-made to run alongside Edwards and Randle.

Edwards himself should keep ascending. He has been hard at work trying to add some mid-post moves, knowing that a back-to-the-basket game is something that can make the team dangerous when games are tight down the stretch. Edwards is also primed to boost his assist percentage and trim turnovers. At 24, the game should start slowing down for him.

With Edwards as a superstar, Randle as a proven No. 2, and everyone else knowing their roles — including Rudy Gobert as a play-finisher — Finch's read-and-react system should continue to keep opponents off balance.

DEFENSE
Gobert doesn't need to be mentioned much on offense, but defensively he remains one of the league's premier anchors. Last year, the Frenchman made the All-Defensive Second Team, marking the eighth time in the last nine years in which he has made one of the two squads.

Gobert doesn't block as many shots as he used to (1.4 per game last year, down from 2.1 in 2023-24), but his verticality, rim deterrence, and immaculate positioning remain elite. He powered Minnesota to a top-five defense last year (110.5 adjusted defensive rating) and can surely do it again.

McDaniels is outstanding on the wing, using his length to smother scorers. Edwards has grown into a committed defender who can handle his man while digging to help. And even the Wolves' less-athletic pieces take pride in being in the right spots and staying connected.

Losing Alexander-Walker stings — he was a feisty, versatile guard defender. But Minnesota's identity on this end is still intact: size, pressure, and competitiveness. They'll remain one of the toughest teams in the league to score on.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+5.1 (4TH)	8TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	115.7 (8TH)	9TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	110.5 (5TH)	5TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.1 (25TH)	

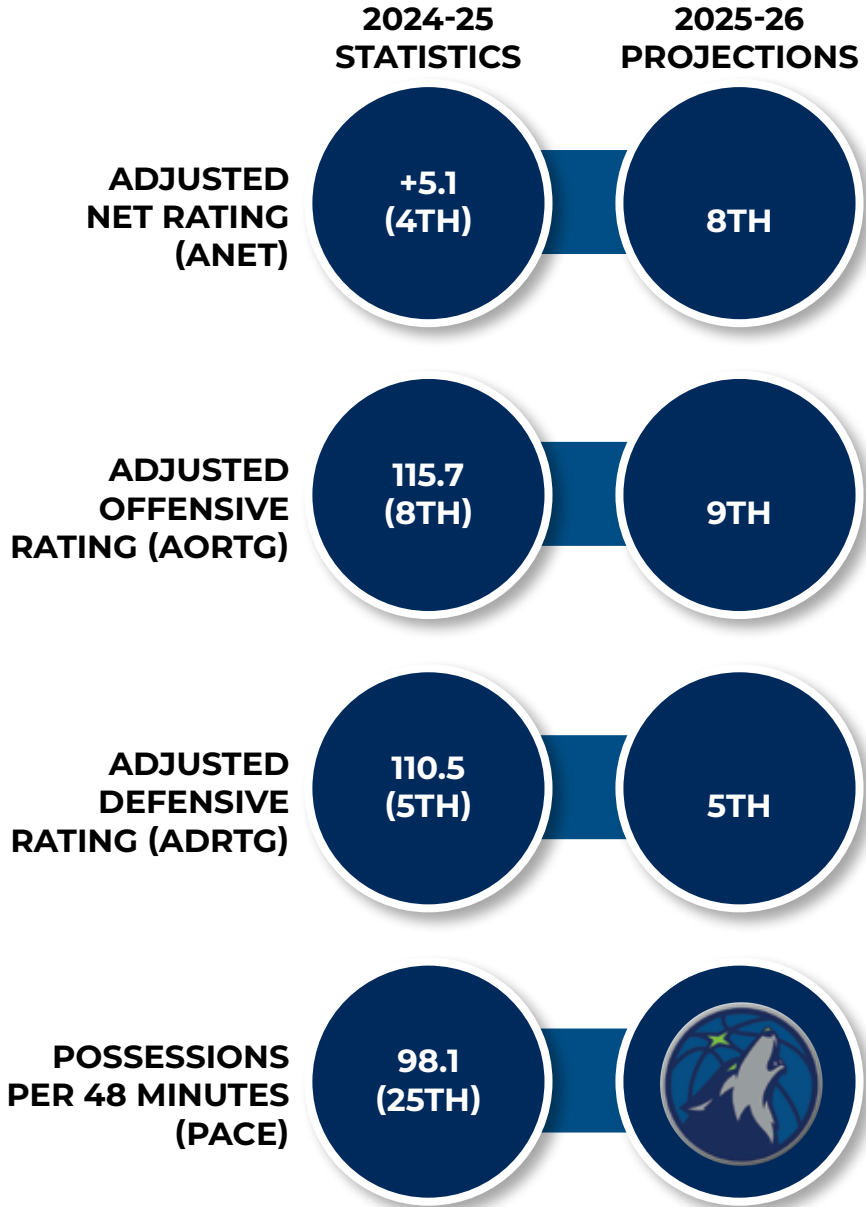*Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com*

OUTLOOK
The Wolves stumbled out of the gate last season, opening 9-10 as they adjusted to life without Towns. But once Randle settled in, they played at a 50-win pace and stormed to the Western Conference Finals.

That context makes the Over appealing. Minnesota may not carry the flash of some West rivals — especially some of the ones that shook things up in the offseason — but their continuity and chemistry raise their floor. Add in growth from Edwards, Shannon, and Dillingham, and there's upside beyond just stability. Jaylen Clark, who has three-and-D potential, could be part of the equation, too.

Don't forget: the Wolves won 56 games in 2023-24. An average of 52.5 wins over the last two seasons should give bettors confidence in 50-plus wins again.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 49.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
13-1	+900	14-1	-600/+425

NEW ORLEANS
PELICANS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 21-61 SU & 34-46-2 ATS, 45-35-2 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 95.0
(#23 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

NEW ORLEANS WENT A BRUTAL 7-34 SU & 12-28-1 ATS ON THE ROAD LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Pelicans have become a punchline. Usually, the jokes center on Zion Williamson's weight, but the front office gave critics fresh material. Trading CJ McCollum — a proven 21.1-points-per-game scorer on an expiring contract — for Jordan Poole, an inefficient gunner with an extra year left on his deal, was widely mocked. The draft-night move raised even more eyebrows: packaging the No. 23 pick and an unprotected 2026 first to move up to No. 13, where they selected Derik Queen.

Queen could turn into a very good center, and pairing him with first-round guard Jeremiah Fears makes for an intriguing rookie class. But mortgaging a potential top-10 pick in a loaded 2026 draft (with Darryn Peterson, Cameron Boozer, and AJ Dybantsa headlining) was a huge gamble. For Troy Weaver, in his first year as GM, the margin for error is slim.

The optimism is that this roster can compete for a postseason spot. That starts with Williamson, who finally appears in the best shape of his career. He averaged 24.6 points, 7.2 rebounds, and 5.3 assists in just 30 games last season, finishing in the 94th percentile in Estimated Plus-Minus. When healthy, he's been one of the league's most dominant players, bullying his way to the rim, creating for teammates, and injecting energy into the building. The challenge is durability: he's topped 70 games only once.

Williamson does have ideal running mates. Herb Jones saw his three-point percentage dip from 41.8% in 2023-24 to 30.6% last year, but when he's making shots he's a smart, versatile piece who cuts, drives, and makes quick reads. Trey Murphy III, meanwhile, is a perfect complement. He averaged 21.2 points while launching 8.3 threes per game at a 36.1% clip. His shooting stretches defenses, opening lanes for Williamson, and Murphy is also improving as a pull-up scorer

and finisher. Jordan Hawkins could carve out minutes for the same reason: spacing.

The center group looks stronger, too. Yves Missi contributed 9.1 points and 8.2 rebounds as a rookie and fits as a lob target in pick-and-rolls. Kevon Looney adds screening, offensive rebounding, and grit. Queen, though undersized for a five, is a skilled face-up scorer, crafty around the rim, and an excellent passer. If his jumper comes along, he could be special.

Point guard is the real swing spot. Poole can fill it up, but he's far better suited as a sixth man than a lead guard. Jose Alvarado offers steadier table-setting and defense, so Willie Green may lean on him. Long term, the future belongs to Fears, who brings dynamic shot creation, smooth playmaking, and a fearlessness with the jumper.

Help is on the horizon, too: Dejounte Murray is targeting a January return from a torn Achilles. He's the one guard on this roster who can organize an offense, hit pull-ups, and close games with poise. Until then, the Pelicans will be missing that stabilizing force.

Green's "0.5" offense — built on quick decisions and ball movement — will be tested by Poole's ball-stopping habits. But with Williamson attacking, Murphy spacing, and some intriguing depth, this group has more balance than people think.

DEFENSE
For New Orleans to overachieve, Williamson must finally show something defensively. At Duke, he looked like a future switchable stopper; in the NBA, that promise hasn't materialized. Now in shape, he should have the agility to guard wings and the strength to battle bigs, but it's time to prove it.

Otherwise, the defensive framework is solid. Poole will be the weak link, but Jones and Murphy bring the length and instincts to form one of the league's better wing tandems. Missi flashed natural rim-protection instincts as a rookie and should improve with added muscle.

Alvarado gives the backcourt a defensive spark, pressuring full court and living up to his "Grand Theft Alvarado" nickname. That energy makes him a candidate to close games.
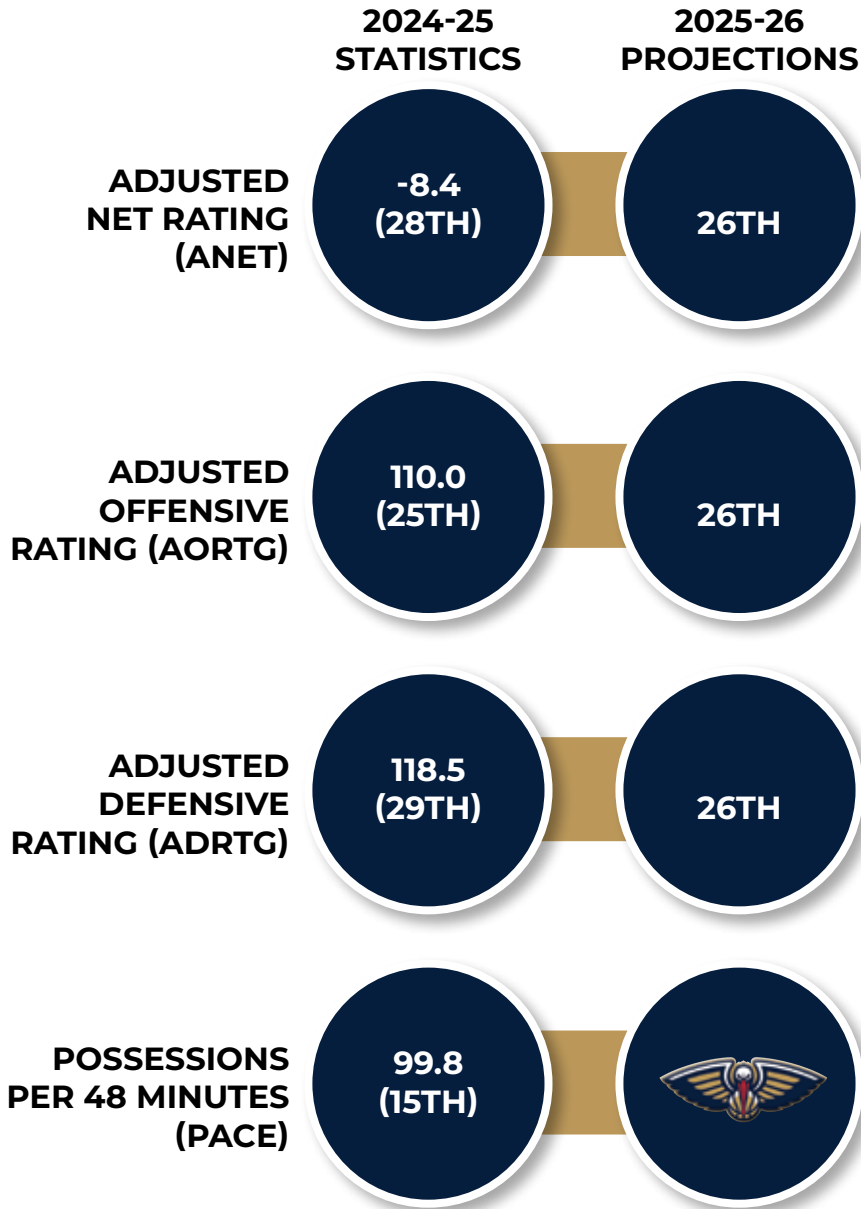
Last year's Pelicans gave up 14.6 threes per game, the second-worst mark in the league. But with Poole replacing McCollum and better defensive pieces around Williamson, this team should at least trend toward competence on this end.

OUTLOOK
On paper, this roster isn't bad. A fit, All-Star-level Williamson surrounded by shooters, a lob target in Missi, and Murray returning midseason is a reasonable formula. But durability and fit issues remain glaring. Even slimmer, betting on Williamson to play 60+ games is dicey. And Poole is a questionable fit on both ends.

If Murray were healthy from Day 1, 40 wins would be in play. As it stands, 30 feels more likely than 40. That makes the Under the sensible lean — not a slam dunk bet, but the most realistic call for a flawed roster with too many variables.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-8.4 (28TH)	26TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	110.0 (25TH)	26TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	118.5 (29TH)	26TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	99.8 (15TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **UNDER 30.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
600-1	250-1	80-1	10-1/-2000

NEW YORK
KNICKS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · ATLANTIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 61-39 SU & 48-49-3 ATS, 50-49-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 102.0
(#5 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

NEW YORK WAS 3-12 ATS PLAYING IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Knicks finished sixth in adjusted offensive rating (117.1) last season and came within a few games of the NBA Finals. But despite the success, it was clear tweaks were needed to maximize the roster. That led to the polarizing decision to fire Tom Thibodeau.

Thibodeau went 226-174 over five years, and for a coach known as a defensive guru, he actually did a solid job on offense. But things grew predictable. He leaned too heavily on Jalen Brunson, marginalized other contributors, and never invested in his bench.

Brunson thrived regardless. He averaged 28.7 points and 6.7 assists in 2023-24, then 26.0 and 7.3 last year. He's one of the NBA's best isolation scorers, blending off-the-dribble shooting, mid-post craft, and surprising finishing ability for an undersized guard.

But his usage rate remained sky-high. With Karl-Anthony Towns and Mikal Bridges in the fold, there's no need for Brunson to shoulder as much as he does. New head coach Mike Brown must diversify things — and avoid running his starters into the ground during the regular season.

Brown was once pigeonholed as a defensive coach but evolved offensively during his time with Golden State. In 2022-23, he guided Sacramento to the league's best offense (119.0 aORTG). Expect him to bring pace, movement, and more creativity.

That starts with tempo. New York ranked 26th in pace (97.7) last year. Brown's Kings consistently ranked top-15. Playing faster will give Bridges, OG Anunoby, and Josh Hart easier chances in transition.

Bridges and Anunoby must also be more involved. Both were often parked in corners while Brunson and Towns ran two-man action. Bridges thrives as a cutter, mover, and secondary attacker. Anunoby has untapped on-ball ability beyond his 37.2% three-point shooting. Expect Brown to unlock more.

Towns should see expanded usage as a hub. He's more than a pick-and-pop shooter. Post-ups, mid-post facilitation, and dribble hand-offs — similar to how Brown used Domantas Sabonis — could open things up for everyone.

For Brunson, sacrifice is key. His usage doesn't need to plummet — De'Aaron Fox was at 28.8% during Brown's best Sacramento year — but Brunson must embrace more off-ball work. That could lighten his playoff load and elevate his teammates.

The Knicks also added Jordan Clarkson and Guershon Yabusele. Clarkson has averaged 16+ points in five straight seasons, giving them the bench scoring they lacked. Yabusele is a bruiser (6'8", 265) who keeps the ball moving and hit 38.0% from deep last year. He could also be a sneaky small-ball five option.

Ultimately, Brown's job is to give everyone purpose — from the stars to role players like Miles McBride, Tyler Kolek, and Pacome Dadiet. More off-ball actions, increased three-point volume, and more flow should make the offense more dynamic. If not, New York can always revert to Brunson hero-ball. But change was necessary.

DEFENSE
The Knicks' defense regressed last year. After finishing eighth in adjusted defensive rating (112.8) in 2023-24, they slipped to 15th (113.7) last year — and opponents consistently found quality looks in the playoffs.

Fixing things starts with Towns. His defensive shortcomings hurt, and Brown must scheme around them — just as he did with Sabonis in Sacramento. Having Mitchell Robinson healthy should help. Robinson has posted a positive Defensive EPM in five straight seasons and was a force in the playoffs. He's a rare rim protector who can also hold up in space.

The wings also need to lock back in. With Bridges, Hart, and Anunoby, New York should have been elite on the perimeter. Instead, opponents shot 36.7% from three (fifth-highest allowed). Brunson's limitations trickle down, but this group must close out harder and contest better.
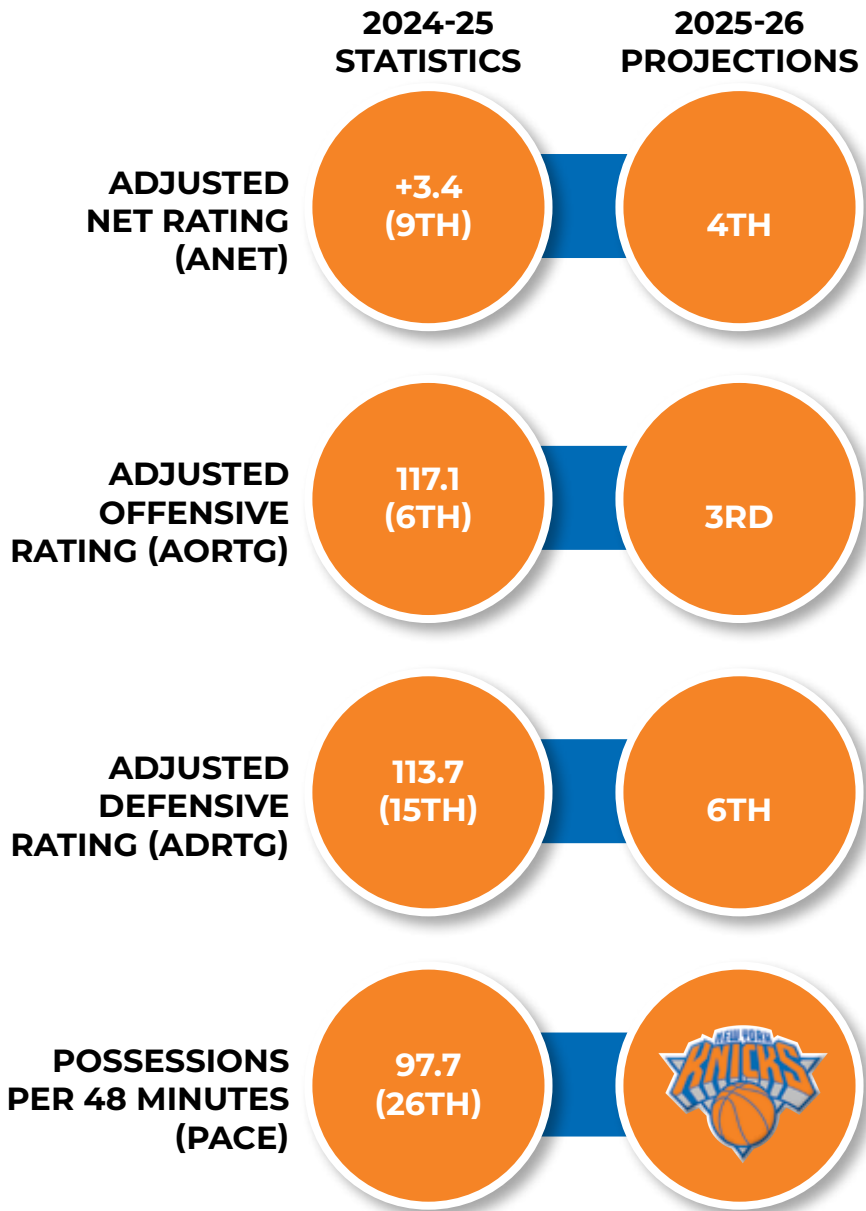
Brown's track record of discipline is encouraging. Much of New York's defensive slippage was due to a lack of focus and organization. A new voice, paired with the roster's talent, should steer them back in the right direction.

OUTLOOK
The Knicks have won 50+ games in back-to-back seasons, and this is their deepest roster in a long time. Healthy, with a new offensive system and a renewed focus on defense, they're built to thrive in a weak Eastern Conference. That said, expectations should be high.

Alternate Overs could be worth a look with a team this talented and deep. And anything short of an NBA Finals berth would be considered a failure. If you think that's unfair, take it up with the front office. Thibodeau took New York to the Eastern Conference Finals. You don't fire a coach like that unless you believe the roster is championship-caliber.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+3.4 (9TH)	4TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	117.1 (6TH)	3RD
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	113.7 (15TH)	6TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	97.7 (26TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   OVER 52.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
+850	+250	-370	-5000/16-1

OKLAHOMA CITY
THUNDER

WESTERN CONFERENCE · NORTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 84-22 SU & 64-38-4 ATS, 56-50 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 105.0
(#1 of 30)

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Thunder enter 2025-26 as defending champions after taking down the Grizzlies, Nuggets, Timberwolves, and Pacers to win the franchise's first title. Most of the talk around their 68-win season focused on the defense, but you don't raise the Larry O'Brien without scoring. Oklahoma City finished fourth in adjusted offensive rating (118.5).

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was the engine. The 27-year-old averaged 32.7 points, 6.4 assists, and 5.0 rebounds on 51.9/37.5/89.8 splits. He ranked second in both Offensive BPM (+8.9) and Offensive EPM (+7.0), and his play drove him to a league-best 20.9 Estimated Wins and his first MVP award.

SGA is unguardable. He lives at the rim, drawing 8.8 free throws per game, dominates the mid-range with his stepback and mid-post game, and keeps improving from three. Add in his passing and calm demeanor in crunch time and there's really no way to keep him down.

Gilgeous-Alexander is flanked by two budding stars. Jalen Williams averaged 21.6 points, 5.3 boards, and 5.1 assists. Like SGA, he scores at all three levels, but with more physicality. He's a tank attacking downhill, and his jumper is smooth. Chet Holmgren put up 15.0 points and 8.0 rebounds, stretching defenses with his pick-and-pop shooting while also attacking slower bigs off the dribble. Despite being built like a mechanical pencil, Holmgren finishes inside with toughness.

Depth is another area Oklahoma City separates. Lu Dort, Cason Wallace, Alex Caruso, Aaron Wiggins, and Isaiah Joe could probably play bigger roles elsewhere. Here, they space the floor — most near 40% from three — and embrace supporting roles.

DID YOU KNOW...

OKLAHOMA CITY WAS 33-5 SU & 26-9-3 ATS VERSUS THE EAST IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

Before last season, the Thunder added Isaiah Hartenstein to supply interior toughness. He pairs with Holmgren against bigger teams, but he also fits their style with his floater, passing, and quick decision-making. He doesn't stretch the floor, but he doesn't clog it either.

The pipeline of talent is absurd. Nikola Topic, once a projected top-five pick before his ACL tear, and Ajay Mitchell are waiting in the wings. Topic in particular has the tools to be a high-level creator when his time comes.

All of this feeds into Mark Daigneault's system, one of the most innovative in the league. It allows SGA the isolation time he needs while keeping everyone else moving and engaged.

If there's a nitpick, it's that the Thunder sometimes hesitate to bomb from deep. They launched threes at a top-10 rate in the regular season but were more reluctant in the playoffs. Then again, they still ended up with the trophy.

DEFENSE
"Defense wins championships" was validated by Oklahoma City's run. The Thunder posted a 106.7 adjusted defensive rating — the best mark since 2021-22 and even more impressive given the offensive explosion across the league.

They had two All-Defensive selections, Dort (First Team) and Williams (Second Team). But Wallace and Caruso might be even better stoppers, and Holmgren is elite as a rim protector. Add in Hartenstein's size and even SGA's capable work, and it's no wonder opponents were suffocated.

The stats tell the story. Opponents averaged 17.0 turnovers per game against OKC, most in the league. The Thunder were the only team to average double-digit steals (10.3), finished second in blocks, and held foes to a league-low 34.2% from three.

This roster is loaded with defensive dawgs. They have size, athleticism, and versatility to match any style. They're also built for playoff basketball. Dort and Caruso, in particular, play with a physical edge that refs often let slide in big moments. Against Minnesota in the West Finals, there were stretches when Wolves guards struggled just to advance the ball past half court.
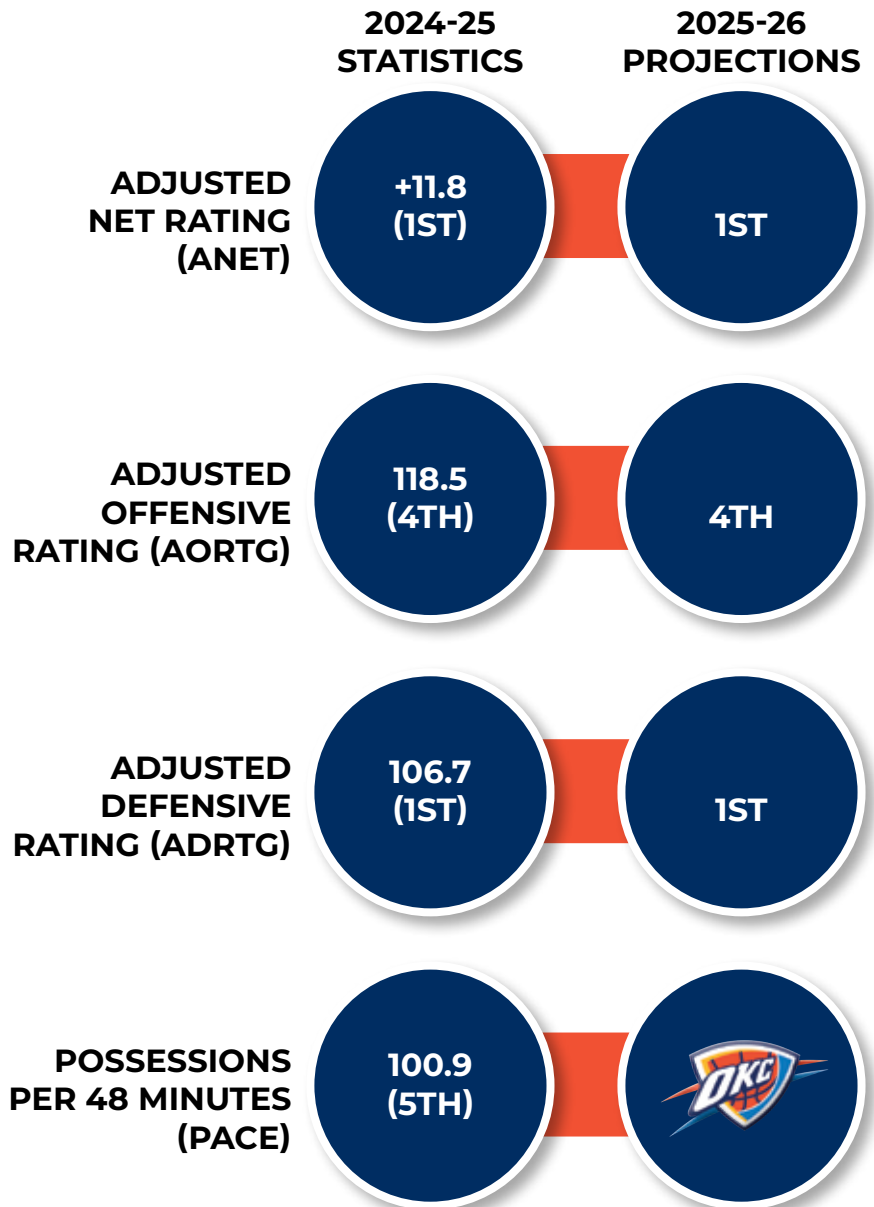
OUTLOOK
The Thunder looked more vulnerable in the playoffs than expected, but they rose to the occasion and claimed the title. SGA was brilliant throughout, while Williams and Holmgren earned their playoff Master's degrees, emerging tougher and more polished after experiencing some ups and downs.

Oklahoma City enters 2025-26 as the betting favorite to repeat, and the case is obvious. Their core is young, improving, and surrounded by depth. The roster is balanced, the system works, and they've already proved they can finish the job.

That said, title defenses rarely come easy. The Thunder's youth won't exempt them from a championship hangover, and the Western Conference has only gotten tougher. Expect every opponent to treat them like the measuring stick. Another Finals run is very possible, but surpassing 63 regular-season wins will be difficult.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+11.8 (1ST)	1ST
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	118.5 (4TH)	4TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	106.7 (1ST)	1ST
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.9 (5TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **UNDER 62.5**

WIN NBA FINALS +245

WIN CONFERENCE +160

WIN DIVISION -425

MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS -20000/30-1

ORLANDO
MAGIC

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING   101.0
(#7 of 30)

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

It's hard to put into words how bad Orlando's offense has been lately, but this stat helps do the trick: the Magic haven't had a top-20 offensive rating since 2011-12. That's 13 straight seasons as one of the NBA's 10 worst offenses.

Last year brought more of the same. Injuries didn't help, but the Magic still finished 27th in adjusted offensive rating (109.1). They played at the slowest pace in the league (96.4) and shot a league-worst 31.8% from three — by a significant margin.

Jamahl Mosley has earned plenty of praise for steering the franchise back to relevance. From 22-60 in his first season to back-to-back playoff berths, he's built a defensive identity and a winning culture. But offensively, his approach has lacked creativity. Now he's under pressure to try to modernize the system.

The front office did Mosley a huge solid in the form of acquiring Desmond Bane. Orlando sent Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Cole Anthony, and four first-round picks to Memphis to get him, and Bane immediately changes the calculus. He averaged 19.2 points, 6.1 rebounds, and 5.3 assists last season, and he's a career 38.1% shooter from deep. He's deadly off movement, comfortable off the dribble, and gives the Magic a dimension they've desperately lacked. With Bane, they should climb out of the basement in both attempts and accuracy from three.

He also brings underrated secondary playmaking. Between Bane, Franz Wagner, Paolo Banchero, and Jalen Suggs, Orlando has plenty of initiators.

Wagner and Banchero are the stars. Despite battling through shooting struggles, Wagner averaged a career-best 24.2 points along with 5.7 rebounds and 4.7 assists. His ability to get downhill and finish creatively makes him one of the league's premier drivers. Banchero, meanwhile, has blossomed into one of basketball's toughest covers. At 6'10" and 250 pounds, he averaged 25.9 points, 7.5 rebounds, and 4.8 assists, thriving as a bruising isolation scorer. If his jumper ticks up even slightly, he could enter the top-five conversation.

Suggs is the glue. He spaces the floor at high volume, organizes the offense, and gives the

DID YOU KNOW...

ORLANDO WENT UNDER THE TOTAL IN 20 OF 30 GAMES VS. THE WEST LAST SEASON

Magic another playmaker. Health is the question — he missed 47 games last season.

The Magic also made a sharp move by adding Tyus Jones, one of the steadiest point guards in the league. He's a liability defensively, but he can run an offense and buy time if Suggs is sidelined. Between Jones and Anthony Black, the backcourt is better protected. Rookie Jase Richardson could also give them a spark.

Center is the biggest hole. Wendell Carter Jr. never developed the stretch element his game once promised. Moe Wagner is a higher-energy option with some pick-and-pop potential, but he's coming off a torn ACL. That leaves Orlando without a reliable big.

Bane's arrival addresses some of the shot-making issues, but Mosley still needs to overhaul his scheme. Playing faster, incorporating more off-ball action, and generating easier looks for Wagner and Banchero is non-negotiable if Orlando wants to take the next step.

DEFENSE
Only Oklahoma City can definitively claim a better defense than Orlando. Despite extended absences from Suggs and Wagner, the Magic finished third in adjusted defensive rating (109.3) last season.

With Suggs, one of the NBA's best guard defenders, and Wagner, an All-Defensive-caliber wing, healthy, Orlando should again field a top-five defense. Add in Black and Jonathan Isaac as disruptive reserves, and Mosley has elite defensive depth at his disposal.

The system also maximizes effort. Mosley simplifies responsibilities: funnel to the baseline, force into crowds, and live with fouls if needed. Orlando committed 21.4 fouls per game last year — third-most in the NBA — and viewed it as a fair trade for physicality and control of the paint.

The Magic's most defining trait, though, is their three-point defense. They allowed the fewest made threes per game (11.4) in the league, and that commitment to running shooters off the line is central to their identity.
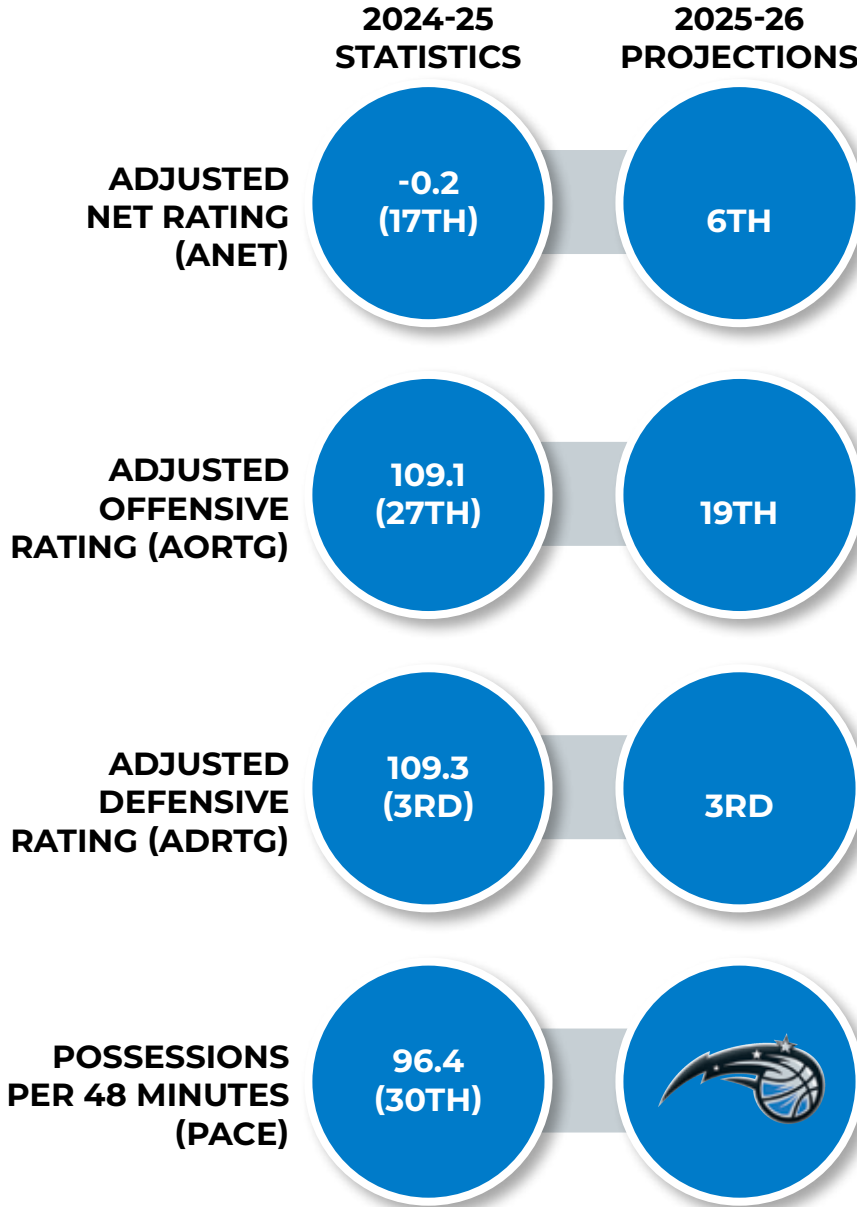
OUTLOOK
The Magic started 17-9 last season, and 50 wins looked well within reach before injuries piled up. Banchero, Wagner, and Suggs missed a combined 105 games, and Orlando settled at 41-41.

The expectation is better injury luck, though with how physically this group plays, it's reasonable to expect each star to miss some time — and Suggs is already going to get off to a slow start. Add in a period of experimentation with new lineups and concepts, and the regular-season win total becomes tricky.

This feels like a team you either pass on or lean Under with. That said, the playoff upside is real. Orlando's ability to defend at an elite level, impose its physicality, and now space the floor more effectively makes them a legitimate threat to win the East.

If everything breaks right — health, Wagner's yips going away, Banchero's continued ascent, a sophomore leap from Tristan da Silva — Orlando could even sneak into the championship conversation.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-0.2 (17TH)	6TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	109.1 (27TH)	19TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	109.3 (3RD)	3RD
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	96.4 (30TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION — **UNDER 51.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
22-1	+550	-160	-1800/+900

PHILADELPHIA
76ERS

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99.0
(#13 of 30)
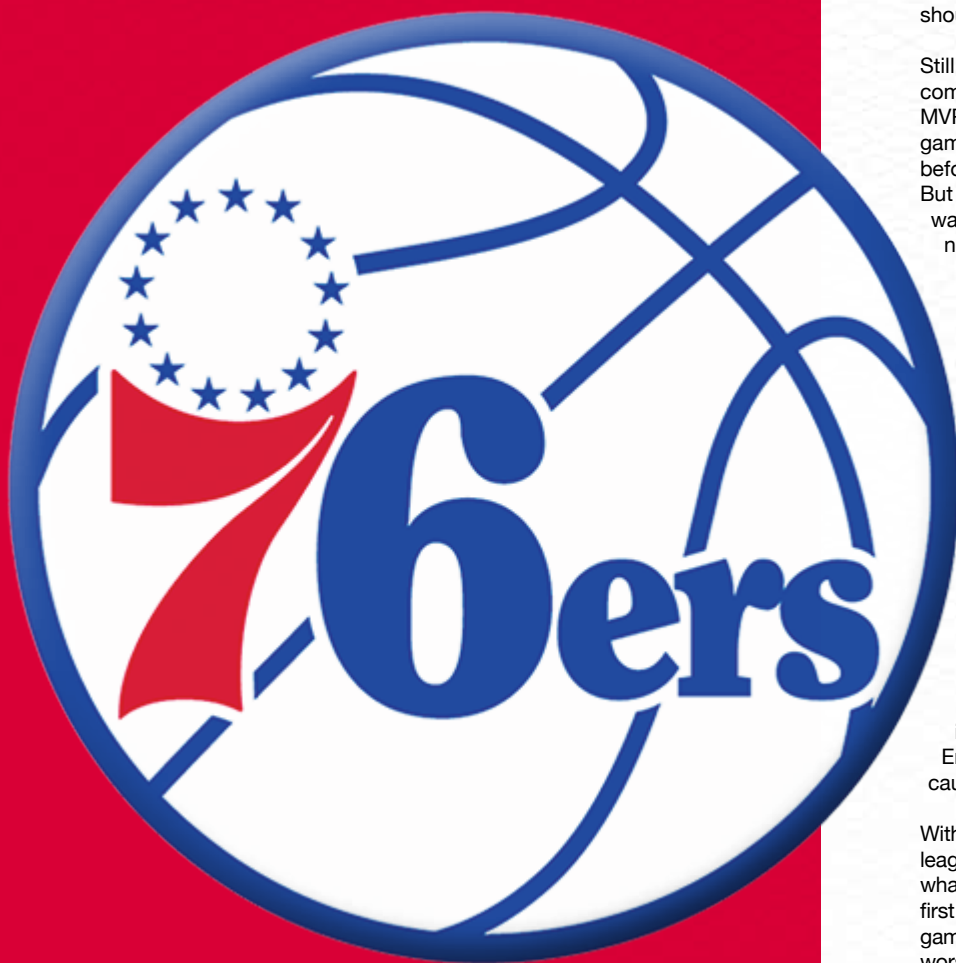
OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

There weren't many positives to take from Philadelphia's 2024-25 season, but that hardly matters. The success of this team, on both ends, always comes down to Joel Embiid's health. Two years ago, in the last season he played 65+ games, the Sixers finished third in the NBA in adjusted offensive rating (117.9). If he logs a decent number of games in 2025-26, Philadelphia should once again be a top-10 offense.

Still, it's impossible to expect much when it comes to Embiid's availability. The 2022-23 MVP and five-time All-NBA performer missed 63 games last year, right after missing 43 the season before. His body is failing him, and he knows it. But he's working to fight it. Before camp, Embiid was grinding at the Sixers' training facility, noticeably slimmer than before. Maybe carrying less weight will ease the stress on his knees. The presence of Andre Drummond — and possibly Adem Bona or rookie Johni Broome — could also help him stay fresh. Nick Nurse might be able to get away with playing Embiid fewer minutes.

If Embiid is healthy when it matters, he'll have a championship-caliber roster around him. Tyrese Maxey averaged a career-high 26.3 points last year, cementing himself as an All-Star. Maxey isn't an above-the-rim finisher, but his first step gets him to the cup whenever he wants, and he remains a dangerous shooter. He hit 42.7% from deep in 2021-22 and 43.4% in 2022-23. His percentages dipped the last two seasons because of increased volume, worse shot quality when Embiid sat, and a broken finger, but there's no cause for concern.

With Maxey and Embiid, the Sixers have one of the league's best one-two punches. The question is what Paul George provides as the third option. His first year in Philly was rough: just 16.2 points per game with a 54.3% true shooting percentage — his worst since 2012-13. Injuries limited him, and he eventually needed arthroscopic knee surgery.

Success for the Sixers hinges on George bouncing back. If he can't replicate anything close to his 2023-24 line (22.6 points, 3.5 assists on 47.1/41.3/90.7 splits), Philadelphia's ceiling drops significantly.

Nurse also needs to find a way to make the Maxey-Embiid-George trio work. They barely shared the floor last season, but when they did, the Sixers scored just 109.0 points per 100 possessions. For context, Brooklyn ranked third-worst in the NBA last year at 108.7.

The good news is they'll have solid pieces around them. Quentin Grimes is expected to start at

DID YOU KNOW...

PHILADELPHIA WAS JUST 12-29 SU & 12-28-1 ATS AT HOME IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

shooting guard, and he averaged 21.9 points in 28 games after arriving in Philly, showcasing efficient shot-making and surprising secondary playmaking. Rookie Jared McCain was also a bright spot, scoring 15.3 points on 38.3% shooting from three in 23 games. He looks like an ideal bench scorer and floor-spacer, and he'll be a big factor when he returns from a thumb injury. Until then, veteran Eric Gordon could serve as the primary shooter off the bench.

Kelly Oubre Jr. continues to bring athleticism and energy, though his jumper has betrayed him — just 31.1% from three in 2023-24 and 29.3% last year. Getting that number back to the mid-30s would be massive. The Sixers will also look to No. 3 pick VJ Edgecombe for energy and creation. He shares Maxey's burst to the rim but adds above-the-rim finishing, and he shot the three well at Baylor after a slow start. He has real three-level scoring potential.

Somewhere in here, there's a team that surrounded the best low-post scorer in basketball with shooting, scoring, and athleticism. But until we see it, Philadelphia will remain more theory than reality.

DEFENSE

When Embiid is healthy, he changes the game defensively. Even if he's lost a step, he's still a dominant low-post defender who deters drivers. His weakness now comes in space, though his new slimmer frame could help him hold his own there. Regardless, he remains one of the league's premier anchors.

George is in a similar spot. He's no longer the elite stopper he once was, but he can still provide above-average perimeter defense. That generally describes most of Philadelphia's starters — with the exception of Maxey. His size makes him a target, but he at least competes, and his 1.8 steals per game last season show he's active in passing lanes.

Edgecombe adds an edge on this end. He's a physical, in-your-face defender, and pairing him with Maxey in the backcourt down the line should work out.

If health weren't a concern, this would be a clear top-10 defense, as it was in 2022-23. But, again, health is the concern.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

|	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-6.1 (25TH)	16TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	111.3 (22ND)	15TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	117.3 (26TH)	14TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.2 (22ND)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

OUTLOOK

On paper, this roster has the goods. Few teams can top a trio of Embiid, Maxey, and George, and the rotation around them is solid. Nurse is also a proven championship coach. But the games aren't played on paper.

If you absolutely must play the Sixers' win total, the lean has to be Over. On the chance Embiid plays more than half the games, you don't want to be stuck holding an Under ticket. The team is too talented, and the East is terrible.

There's also the tiniest bit of value in taking a shot on Philadelphia to win the East (14-1) — or even the title (40-1) — but make sure you don't overextend. With this team, you better be extra prepared to lose any bets you put in. The season hasn't even started yet and the return dates for Embiid and George are already mysteries.
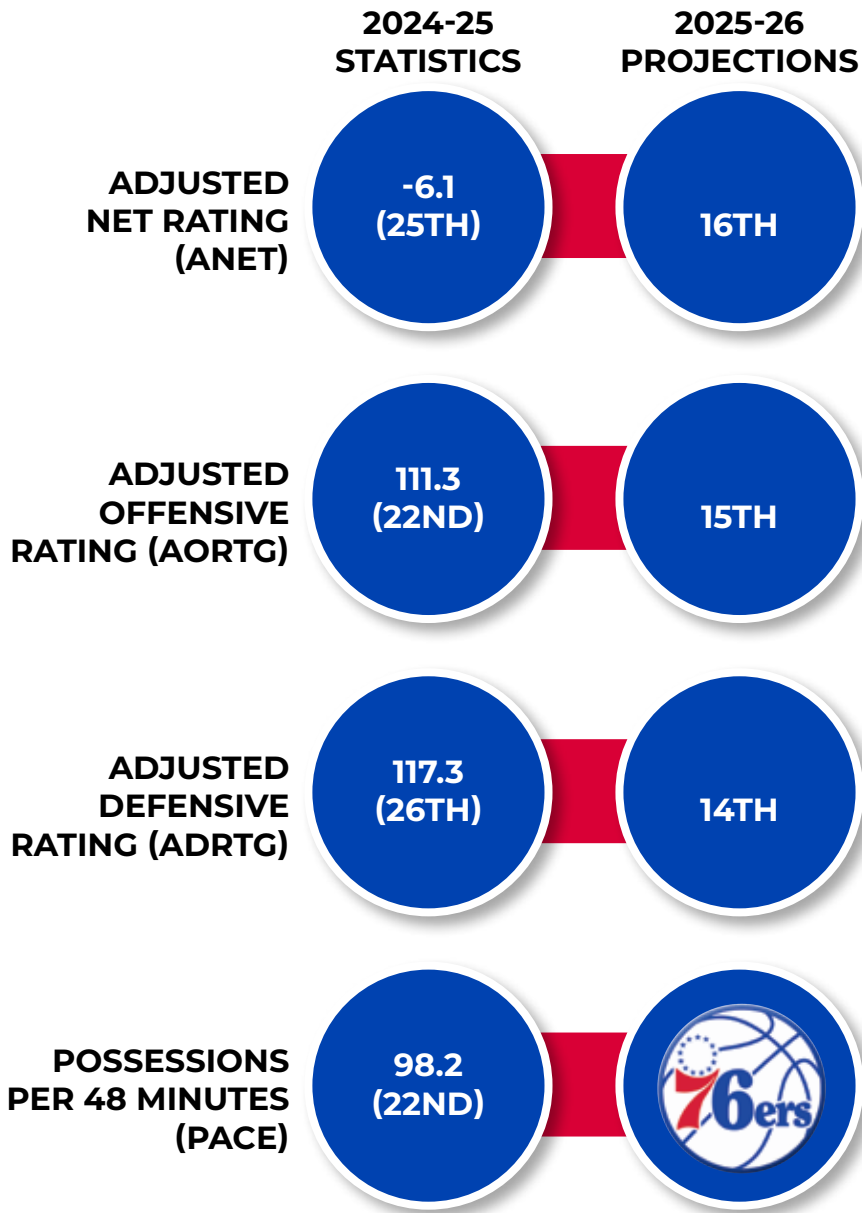
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **OVER 42.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
35-1	11-1	+550	-200/+160

PHOENIX
SUNS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · PACIFIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 36-46 SU & 31-50-1 ATS, 42-40 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 94.0
(#26 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

PHOENIX WAS 7-22-1 ATS IN NON-CONFERENCE ACTION IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Phoenix finished 11th in adjusted offensive rating (115.1) last year — respectable, but underwhelming for a team with Devin Booker, Kevin Durant, and Bradley Beal. Mike Budenholzer was supposed to modernize the attack with more threes and rim attempts, but the Suns instead doubled down on mid-range shots. They finished second in mid-range frequency (37.4%) and last in shots at the rim (21.8%). When the defense also cratered, it led to Bud's firing, Durant's trade, and Beal's buyout.

Now the franchise is rebooting with Jordan Ott, a first-time head coach and former Cavaliers assistant. Around the Valley, staffers keep spamming the word "alignment" the way Stone Cold used to bark out "What?" in the Attitude Era. It's the buzzword Ishbia and GM Brian Gregory are leaning on as they try to reset the culture with youth, effort, and buy-in.

Ott has earned rave reviews from players and peers for his work ethic and film-room obsession. He wants the Suns to play faster, hunt easy buckets early in possessions, and move constantly off the ball. He's a big believer in persistent cutting, better shot selection, and crashing the offensive glass to generate extra possessions.

Booker will be at the center of all of it. The 28-year-old is one of the smoothest three-level scorers in the world, but he's also underrated as a playmaker. With no true point guard on the roster, this will be Booker's show. Expect All-NBA numbers.

Joining him are Jalen Green and Dillon Brooks, acquired in the Durant deal. Green averaged 21.0 points for Houston but wore out his welcome with inconsistent efficiency. Still, he launched 8.1 threes per game at 35.4% and adds rare speed and athleticism. Brooks is less flashy but steady — a 39.7% shooter from deep and a better scorer than his reputation suggests.

Grayson Allen, Royce O'Neale, and Ryan Dunn round out the wing rotation. Allen and O'Neale bring reliable spacing — Allen even led the league in three-point shooting (46.1%) two years ago. Dunn is the opposite: a shaky shooter but explosive athlete who can cut, rebound, and make hustle plays. If his jumper ever comes, he'll be a problem.

The frontcourt has been rebuilt, too. Mark Williams (15.3 points, 10.2 rebounds for Charlotte) gives Phoenix a strong inside presence, while lottery pick Khaman Maluach brings raw size and upside. Oso Ighodaro and Nick Richards add energy and rebounding. Collectively, this group should dominate the offensive glass.

Two other names to watch: Collin Gillespie, a sparkplug guard with shooting and playmaking chops, and Nigel Hayes-Davis, fresh off an MVP-level season in Europe, who can shoot, score in the mid-post, and serve as a connector.

This roster is younger, bigger, and more athletic than last year's star-heavy nightmare. They won't wow you with name value, but they'll run, keep opponents guessing, and lean on Booker late in close games.

DEFENSE
For all the talk about culture and toughness, this roster still has defensive issues. Ott will demand more structure and effort, but there's only so much he can do with this personnel.

Brooks sets the tone as a relentless on-ball defender and vocal leader. Pairing him with Dunn, who should one day be an elite wing stopper, could give the Suns a real edge on the perimeter. O'Neale brings similar toughness, though he hasn't defended at the same level since his Utah days.

Guard defense is the big hole. Unless Ott unlocks something in Green, the two-guard spot will bleed points. Booker only locks in on this end when he's wearing a Team USA jersey, Allen is limited, and Gillespie is scrappy but undersized.

On the interior, Williams has size but hasn't been a reliable anchor, and Maluach needs time to develop.
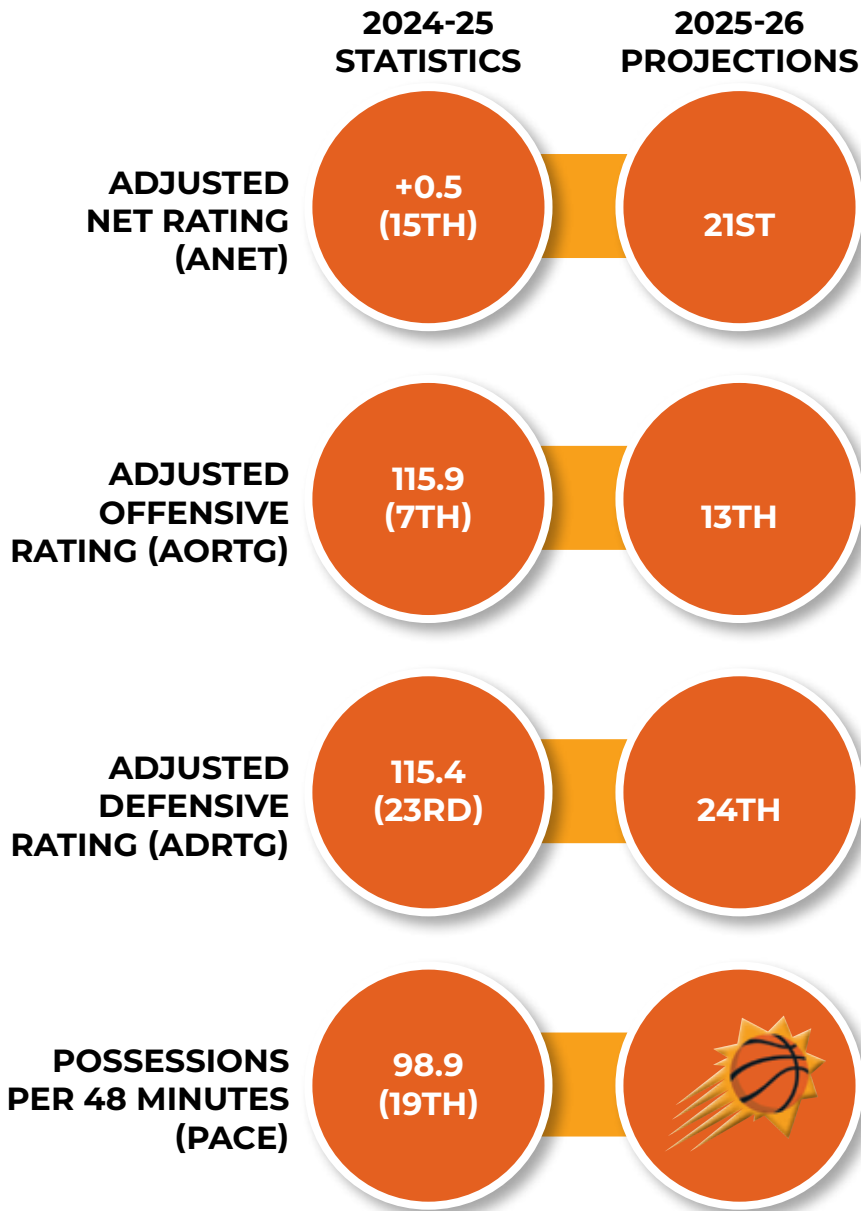
Phoenix finished middle of the pack in defensive rebounding (70.9%) last year, but with more size inside, they could improve there. Reducing opponent threes — 37.0% accuracy allowed last season — should also be a priority.

OUTLOOK
The Suns keep talking about hustle, culture, and alignment, but this roster doesn't exactly scream grit-and-grind. Unless Green makes a leap and others hit career years, Phoenix probably lands in the 25–30 win range.

Still, this group could be feisty. Ott has the look of a coach who can squeeze effort out of his guys, much like Fernandez did in Brooklyn. That won't translate into playoff contention, but it could make the Suns an ATS darling — especially at home, where fans are desperate to rally behind a team that doesn't look joyless playing basketball.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+0.5 (15TH)	21ST
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	115.9 (7TH)	13TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.4 (23RD)	24TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.9 (19TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION — UNDER 31.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
600-1	300-1	75-1	+650/-1000

PORTLAND
TRAIL BLAZERS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · NORTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 36-46 SU & 46-35-1 ATS, 40-41-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 95.0
(#24 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

PORTLAND WENT 7-6 SU & 11-1-1 ATS IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

After a rocky start to his coaching career, Chauncey Billups found his footing in 2024-25. Portland went 36-46, making a late push for the Play-In while covering spreads at an impressive 47-34-1 clip. The Blazers were competitive nearly every night, and Billups' work put him on short lists for other coaching jobs.

The offense remains his biggest challenge. Portland finished near the bottom in adjusted offensive rating (110.9), dragged down by poor shooting and turnovers. The Blazers hit only 34.2% of their threes (fifth-worst in the NBA) and coughed it up 16.0 times per game — better than only Utah. The defense improved after the All-Star break, but the offense never caught up.

Help is on the way, at least on paper. Portland added Jrue Holiday and Damian Lillard in the offseason. Both could have solved shooting and decision-making issues — if healthy. Unfortunately, Lillard tore his Achilles in Milwaukee's playoff series against Indiana and will miss the entire season.

Scoot Henderson, who averaged 12.7 points and 5.1 assists while showing major growth as a shooter (35.4% from three) and decision-maker, will also miss the first few months with a torn hamstring. Without him, the burden of running the offense falls heavily on Holiday. The veteran is still reliable, but he's not as explosive as he once was and has to be managed carefully.

That puts more pressure on Deni Avdija and Shaedon Sharpe, two of the most intriguing pieces on this roster. Avdija broke out last season with career highs across the board — 16.9 points, 7.3 rebounds, and 3.9 assists — while shooting 36.5% from deep. He's a force attacking downhill and has blossomed into a versatile playmaker. Billups may use him as a point forward to ease Holiday's workload. Sharpe averaged 18.5 points and posted his first positive Offensive EPM (+0.2). His shot mechanics are also too clean for him to stay at 31.1% from three. If that number rises to 35%, his efficiency could jump significantly.

On the wings, Toumani Camara and Jerami Grant add value. Camara is an explosive finisher and cutter who just needs to keep developing his jumper. Grant remains a skilled scorer, but Portland will demand more efficiency from him; empty-calorie buckets won't cut it for a team pushing toward the postseason.

The center rotation also looks interesting. Deandre Ayton is gone, opening the door for Donovan Clingan to start. He won't create his own looks, but he's a good screener, quick decision-maker, and reliable finisher around the rim. He's also working on a jumper that could come later on. Rookie Yang Hansen, the surprise 16th pick, turned heads at Summer League with his Jokic-like vision and touch. He could contribute in small bursts right away. Robert Williams III remains productive in limited minutes, excelling as a rim runner, rebounder, and passer, but durability is always a concern.

Put together, this roster looks more like a functioning basketball team than last year's group. But with Henderson sidelined and Lillard unavailable, top-20 efficiency still feels out of reach. Late-game shot creation will be a major weakness.

DEFENSE
Portland's turnaround last season came on this end. From February 1 onward, the Blazers ranked fourth in points allowed per 100 possessions (112.0). Billups has set the expectation for them to remain one of the NBA's stingiest defenses.

It starts with Holiday. Even at 34, he finished in the 92nd percentile in Defensive EPM (+1.5) — his sixth straight year in the 90th percentile or better. He still plays chest-to-chest defense, pressures the ball, and switches across multiple positions. Camara earned All-Defensive Second Team honors in his second season, already profiling as one of the league's best wing stoppers. Clingan, meanwhile, will be asked to replicate his UConn role as a defensive anchor. His size and instincts should give Portland a strong rim deterrent.

Avdija brings size and effort, even if he's not a lockdown wing. Sharpe is the weak link — his athleticism hasn't translated defensively, and Billups has benched him for lapses before. Watching Holiday every day could help him raise his level.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

|	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-2.4 (22ND)	23RD
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	110.9 (23RD)	25TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	113.4 (13TH)	22ND
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	99.5 (16TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

The Blazers also have strong defensive depth. Matisse Thybulle remains an elite disruptor off the bench, and Williams adds rim protection in spurts. Defensive rebounding remains the concern; Portland was 28th in defensive rebound rate (68.2%) last season. Cleaning that up is essential if they want to be a great defensive team.

OUTLOOK
Portland probably won't replicate its February-April defensive dominance, but the framework for a top-10 season is there if the core stays healthy. The bigger problem is on the other end: this roster lacks enough scoring and late-game creators to consistently cash in on stops.

Things will improve once Henderson returns, provided the hamstring heals cleanly. Until then, Portland will grind out games on defense but struggle to score. In a brutal West, that points to another year outside the playoff picture. It also makes 36 wins seem out of reach. But the Blazers could end up being a good ATS team again.
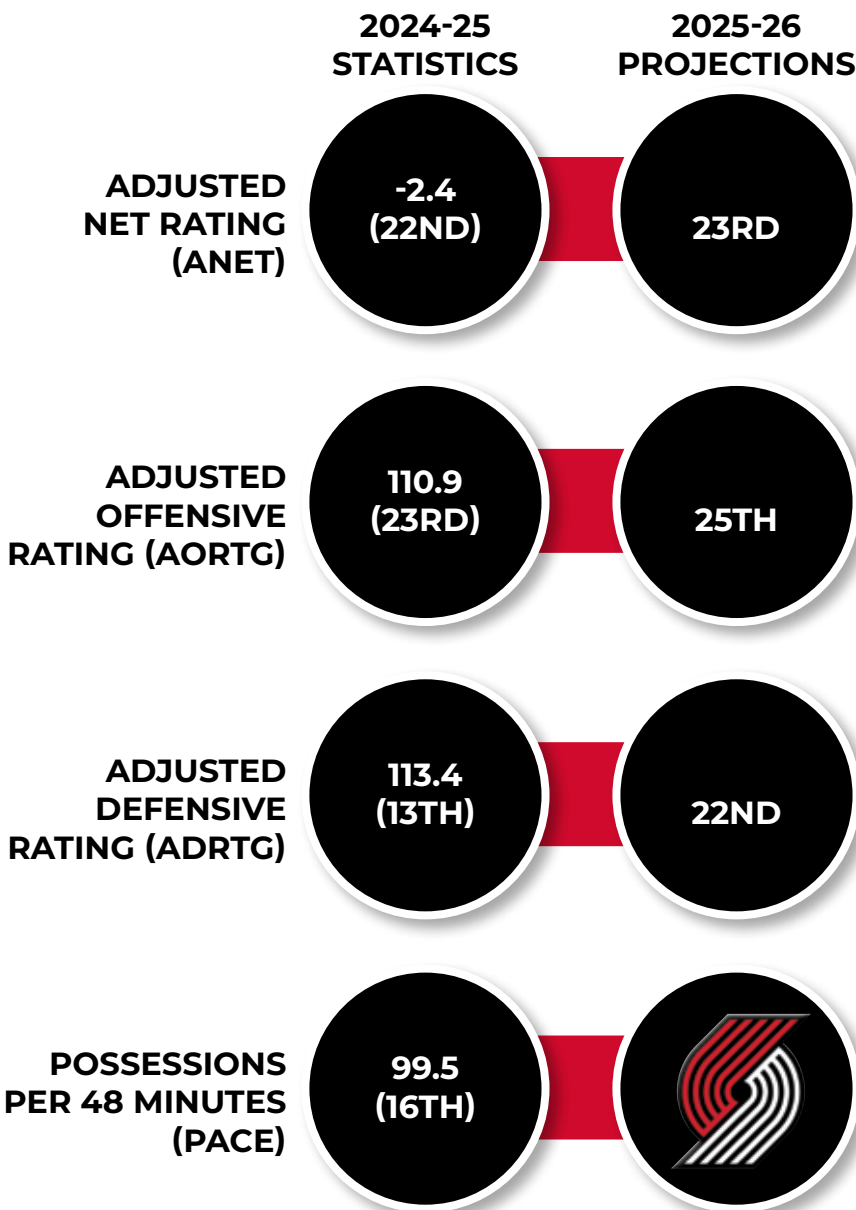
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   UNDER 35.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
800-1	400-1	200-1	+390/-550

SACRAMENTO
KINGS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · PACIFIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 40-43 SU & 34-45-4 ATS, 43-38-2 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING **96.0**
(#22 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

SACRAMENTO WAS 5-11 SU & 4-12 ATS IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

It raised some eyebrows when Sacramento moved on from Mike Brown. He guided the Kings to 48 wins and the league's best adjusted offensive rating (119.0) in 2022-23, and he's still well respected — enough that New York gave him a four-year, $40 million deal to push them from the Eastern Conference Finals to the NBA Finals. Coaches don't get that kind of offer if the league thinks they're the problem.

Brown's exit likely influenced De'Aaron Fox's. After years of a coaching carousel and front-office instability, the All-Star guard grew tired of the noise. Sacramento had no choice but to make a tough trade, losing its franchise point guard and one of the fastest end-to-end players in the league.

Now the Kings turn the page with Doug Christie. The Sacramento legend went 27-24 as interim head coach last season and has earned a full-time shot. Christie envisions a team that runs relentlessly, attacks the paint, and sprays threes. In January, during his best stretch as interim, the Kings went 10-4 while playing at the fifth-fastest pace (101.2) and hitting nearly 14 triples per game. The plan is to sustain that identity over a full year.

The offensive core remains Domantas Sabonis, Zach LaVine, and DeMar DeRozan. Sabonis is still one of the league's premier hubs: 19.1 points, 13.9 boards, and 6.0 assists per game, plus a surprising 41.7% from three on slightly higher volume. His dribble handoffs will be the backbone of Christie's offense. LaVine looked good after arriving midseason, averaging 22.4 points with pristine shooting splits (51.1/44.6/87.4). He's lethal on the catch, dangerous off the bounce, and a reliable closer. DeRozan, meanwhile, keeps chugging along at age 36, averaging 22.2 points as one of the NBA's elite mid-range scorers and foul-drawers.

Keegan Murray starts next to that trio. He dipped to 12.4 points per game while his three-point percentage slid to 34.3%, a far cry from the 41.1% he shot as a rookie. Sacramento needs him back closer to that rookie version. His gravity as a shooter, his mid-range counters, and his fit with Sabonis are crucial to what Christie wants to do.

The big offseason addition was Dennis Schroder. Across three stops last year, he averaged 13.1 points and 5.4 assists, but Kings fans are dreaming of the EuroBasket version — 20.3 points, 7.2 assists, relentless paint pressure, and steady orchestration. The truth lies somewhere in between, but Schroder is a competitor, a capable

table-setter, and a clear upgrade over last season's patchwork point guard play.

Schroder's arrival moves Malik Monk back to his Sixth Man role, where he'll again hunt 15 points a night and make plays as a secondary creator. Keon Ellis and rookie Devin Carter will also see minutes. Ellis is already a trusted three-and-D reserve, while Carter is a high-energy guard who gets downhill, makes shots, and pushes tempo.

Rookies Nique Clifford and Maxime Raynaud add bench intrigue. Clifford, a versatile 6-foot-6 wing, should thrive in transition and play well off Sabonis. And he flashed an improved jumper at Summer League. If that holds, he'll be a huge steal. Raynaud doesn't pop the same way but can shoot, finish at the rim, and blend in seamlessly as a backup big.

Altogether, there's a path to top-15 offensive efficiency. Critics scoffed at giving Schroder $15 million annually, but he should help Christie actually run the up-tempo, spacing-heavy system he wants. With Sabonis as the hub, LaVine's shotmaking, and DeRozan's consistency, the firepower is here. The issue: this group probably needs to be top-five offensively to offset the defense.

DEFENSE
Christie wants conditioning to be a staple — he's asked players to be ready to pick up 94 feet, harass ball-handlers, and shorten the clock. In theory, it sounds great. In practice, it mostly means Schroder running around while everyone else saves their legs. Without buy-in across the board, that type of pressure could just end up as wasted cardio.

LaVine and DeRozan remain below-average on the ball, and their team defense isn't much better. Sabonis tries, but he lacks the length to protect the rim and the foot speed to disrupt actions higher on the floor. Opponents won't be intimidated inside.

The bench provides more juice. Ellis is a versatile stopper who embraces any assignment, Carter plays with shades of Patrick Beverley and Alvarado, and Clifford has the tools to grow into a high-level wing defender. That trio could make second units miserable, though Christie will eventually need to mix them into closing groups if he wants balance.
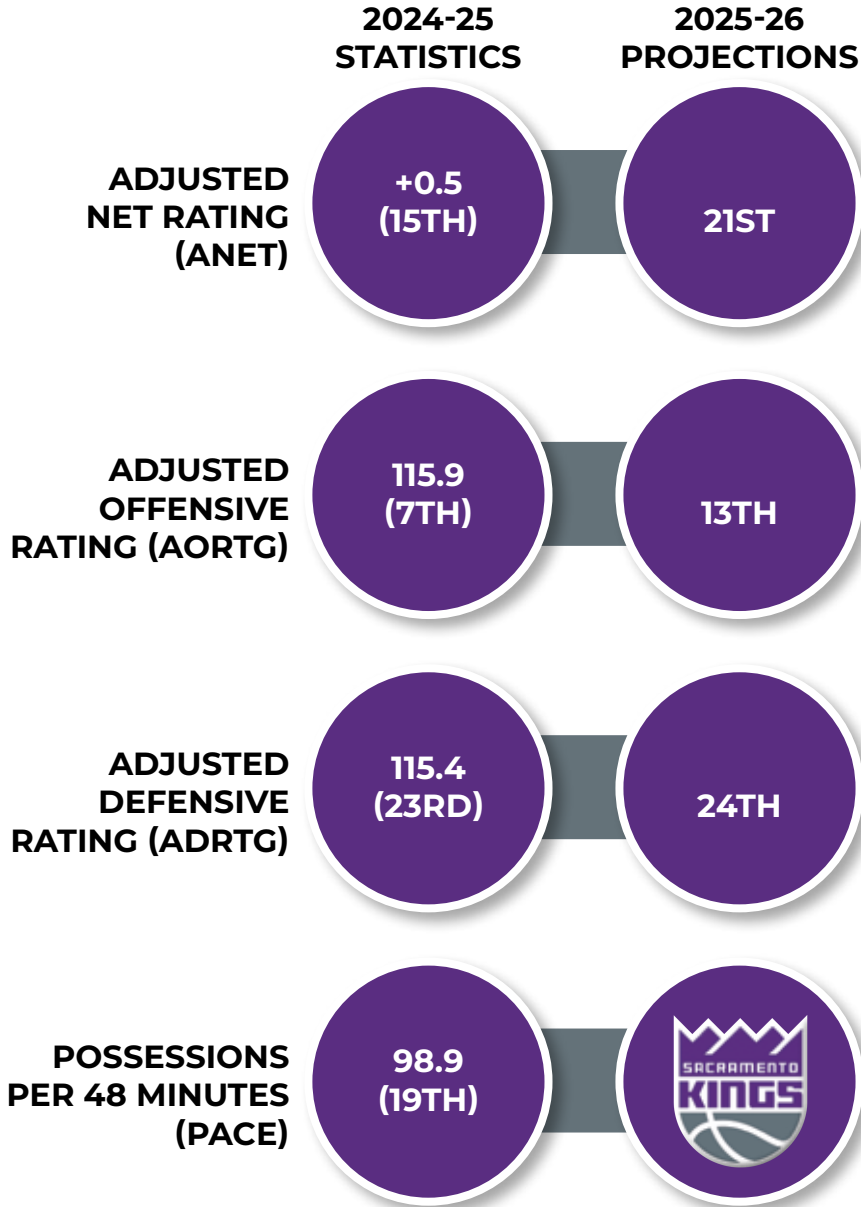
Last season's numbers paint the picture: Sacramento allowed 14.5 made threes per game (28th) and gave up 68.2% shooting at the rim (also 28th). Until the personnel changes, it's hard to see real improvement.

OUTLOOK
Sacramento isn't going to tank. Vivek Ranadive wants his team to make the playoffs, and the front office builds accordingly. That's why this team is filled with players firmly in their primes — or exiting them. The fit just isn't right. There's too much offense, too little defense.

The Kings can score, but they can't stop anybody, and in a brutal Western Conference, that math won't add up. They're a strong bet to go Under 36.5 wins, and with Christie preaching pace and offense-first players driving the car, nightly Overs will be worth monitoring. Sacramento was 43-39-1 to the Over last year. The Kings should play more high-scoring games this season.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	+0.5 (15TH)	21ST
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	115.9 (7TH)	13TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	115.4 (23RD)	24TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	98.9 (19TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   **UNDER 36.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
500-1	250-1	30-1	+330/-450

SAN ANTONIO
SPURS

WESTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 34-48 SU & 39-43 ATS, 46-35-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING **99.0**
(#14 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

SAN ANTONIO WENT JUST 5-11 SU & 4-12 ATS VS. SOUTHWEST DIVISION RIVALS LAST SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Victor Wembanyama won't be a finished product for a few years, but he's already pushing top-five status. The 7-foot-3 phenom averaged 24.3 points, 11.0 rebounds, and 3.7 assists last season, hitting 35.2% of his 8.8 threes per game before a blood clot ended his year. He burned opponents as a pick-and-pop threat, lob finisher, and even self-creator. A true three-level scorer at his size is almost unfair.

The question now is what kind of roster to build around him. In theory, surrounding Wemby with shooters would fast-track San Antonio into a top-10 offense. But that's not exactly how this team looks today.

At last year's deadline, the Spurs traded for De'Aaron Fox. He averaged 23.5 points and 6.3 assists, and he's shown he can lead an elite attack — Sacramento was first in adjusted offensive rating in 2022-23 with Fox at the helm. His burst off the bounce and pull-up game should complement Wembanyama nicely. But Fox remains streaky from deep, shooting just 31.0% last season and topping 35.0% only twice in eight years. If the jumper doesn't come around, the ceiling is capped.

The backcourt picture is even more complicated because San Antonio also has Stephon Castle, last year's Rookie of the Year, and Dylan Harper, the No. 2 pick in the 2025 draft. Both are explosive athletes who thrive as drivers and playmakers but lack reliable outside shots. Balancing minutes — and spacing — among Fox, Castle, and Harper will be tricky.

On the wing, Devin Vassell, Keldon Johnson, and Harrison Barnes all bring different strengths. Vassell disappointed after signing his extension, averaging 16.3 points on decent but unspectacular efficiency. He looks more like a

solid third or fourth option than a budding star, spacing the floor and creating in small doses. Johnson remains an energy guy who attacks the rim hard, but his three-point shooting slipped to 31.8% and needs to rebound. Barnes is the steady vet, providing 12.3 points per game and high-level shooting (43.3% from deep). He won't be a game-changer offensively, but his floor spacing and professionalism matter.

First-rounder Carter Bryant adds intrigue as a combo forward. He projects as a spot-up shooter who can cut and finish in transition. Whether he develops more off-the-dribble skills will determine his ceiling, but he should contribute quickly. Jeremy Sochan also remains part of the puzzle. He can't shoot, but he's athletic, versatile, and impacts games in subtle ways.

San Antonio also improved its frontcourt depth. Luke Kornet provides size, screens, and finishing, while Kelly Olynyk — when healthy — brings shooting and passing from the five. Both can keep things functional in Wemby's minutes off the floor.

Ultimately, the Spurs have plenty of talent around their superstar, but the guards will dictate the ceiling. Mitch Johnson preaches spacing and high-volume threes, yet the roster isn't naturally built to play that way. How flexible he is in tailoring the system to his players will be crucial. He'd be wise to lean on Gregg Popovich as much as possible.

DEFENSE
As good as Wembanyama already is on offense, he's even scarier defensively. Last season he averaged 3.8 blocks and 1.1 steals, finishing fourth in Defensive EPM (+3.2). He's the best shot blocker in the world, alters every drive to the rim, and has the foot speed to switch onto perimeter players when needed.

Sochan pairs nicely with him in the frontcourt, adding versatility and toughness. Bryant should eventually slot in as a long, athletic wing stopper. Castle already looks like a Jrue Holiday–type at the point of attack, hounding ball handlers for 94 feet.
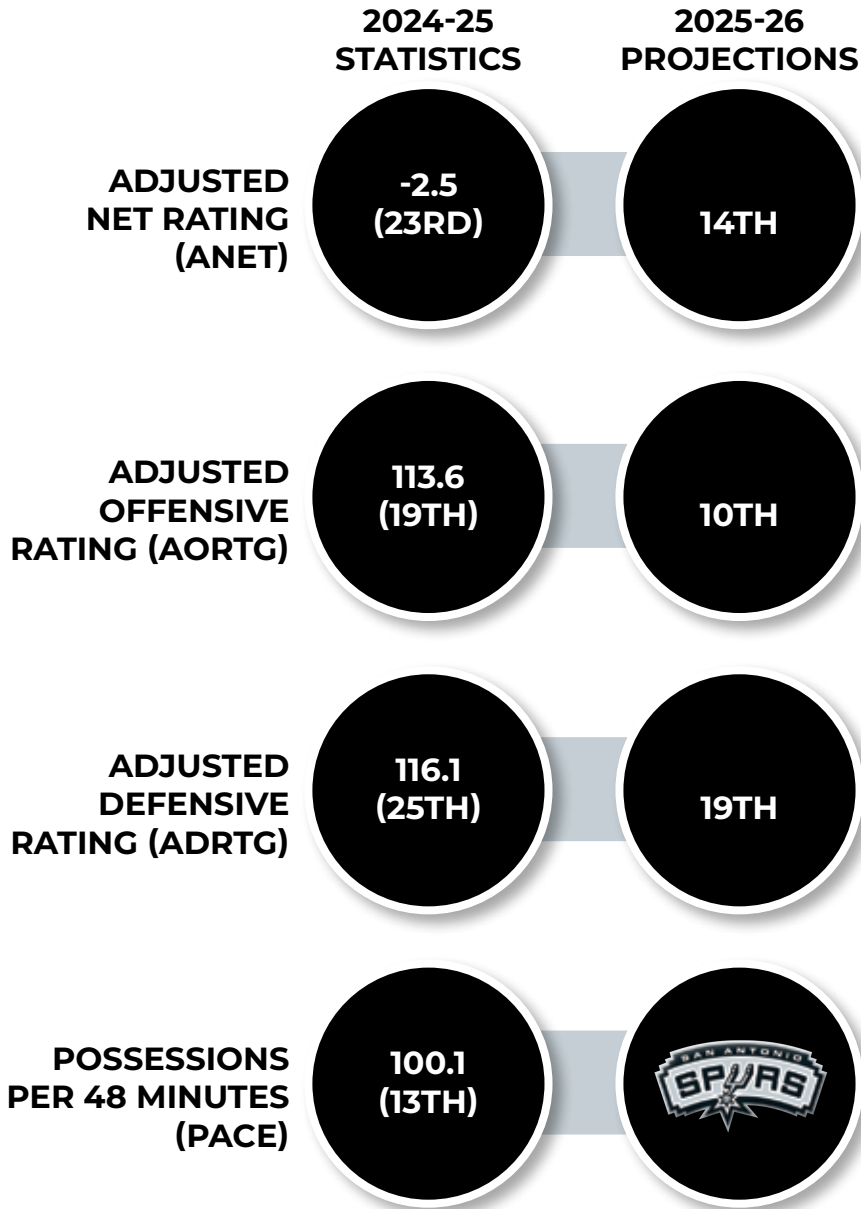
Still, not everyone fits the defensive mold. Fox, Johnson, and Vassell all fall short of expectations guarding their positions, and that will cause headaches. The Spurs also had glaring team issues last year: they allowed 14.4 made threes per game (fourth-worst) and ranked 26th in defensive rebounding (69.0%). Until those numbers improve, the defense will be inconsistent no matter how dominant Wemby is.

OUTLOOK
The Spurs are stockpiling talent around a generational star, and their time will come. But it probably won't be this season. The roster construction is messy, with redundant skill sets in the backcourt and questions about spacing and defense on the wings.

In a loaded Western Conference, San Antonio looks like one of the shakier postseason hopefuls on paper. Wembanyama alone ensures competitiveness, but the overall mix isn't ready for prime time. The long-term future is blindingly bright; the short-term outlook is bumpier.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-2.5 (23RD)	14TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	113.6 (19TH)	10TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	116.1 (25TH)	19TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.1 (13TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION   UNDER 44.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
65-1	35-1	+450	-160/+125

TORONTO
RAPTORS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · ATLANTIC DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 30-52 SU & 47-32-3 ATS, 41-40-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 96.5
(#21 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

TORONTO POSTED A HUGE 32-16 ATS MARK ON THE STANDARD ONE DAY REST SCHEDULE SCENARIO IN '24-25

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

The Raptors were lousy offensively last year, finishing bottom five in adjusted offensive rating (109.6). Atrocious three-point shooting was a big culprit. Toronto made only 11.8 threes per game, the second-lowest mark in the league. Turnovers didn't help either, with the Raptors coughing it up 15.3 times per game (24th in NBA).

The biggest factor, though, was health. Scottie Barnes, Immanuel Quickley, RJ Barrett, Jakob Poeltl, and Gradey Dick combined to miss 143 games.

Just having Barnes, Quickley, Barrett, and Dick back should push the Raptors closer to league average. But the real swing factor is Brandon Ingram. Toronto acquired him at the deadline and extended him for three years, $120 million, though an ankle injury shut him down before he ever suited up.

Ingram has plenty of detractors, but there's no denying he's a walking bucket. Already one of the league's best mid-range scorers, he was also hitting 37.4% of his threes on higher volume before getting hurt. He's exactly the kind of offensive weapon this team needed.

Pairing Ingram with Barnes gives Toronto two tough covers. Barnes' shooting cratered to 27.1% from three last year after hitting 34.1% in 2023-24, but he remains a high-level point forward — fluid for his size, able to handle the ball, and dangerous attacking downhill. If the jumper returns, he'll thrive thanks to the extra attention Ingram draws.

Quickley and Barrett should also benefit. Quickley is a crafty creator who can splash deep threes off the dribble or jitterbug his way to the rim. Barrett has turned himself into a reliable catch-and-shoot option, especially from the corners, which complements the southpaw's awkward-yet-effective straight-line driving.

Dick is the perfect piece alongside them. He shot just 35.0% from deep last season, but it won't be long before he's in the 40% range. He has a

quick, high release, can shoot on the move, and has enough athleticism and fluidity to punish closeouts.

The depth is intriguing, too. Jamal Shead, Ja'Kobe Walter, Ochai Agbaji, and Jonathan Mogbo can all contribute. Shead is a steady table-setter who can run offense and knock down open threes. Walter and Agbaji are floor-spacers. Mogbo is a unique small-ball big with grab-and-go ability, surprising handles, and energy as a finisher.

Then there's Collin Murray-Boyles, the No. 9 pick in the 2025 NBA Draft. He's a strong finisher with a decent face-up game and good passing instincts. The question is the jumper — without some threat of a three-ball, his role will be limited.

This is a talented roster. The challenge falls on Darko Rajakovic to make the pieces work. He wants to run a 0.5 offense built on quick decisions, but several players here are natural ball-stoppers.

DEFENSE
The Raptors were scrappier defensively than their record suggested. They finished only 17th in adjusted defensive rating (113.8), but after the All-Star break they ranked second in raw defensive rating (109.4). Rajakovic had them buying in, and now they'll look to build on that.

Two stats stood out: Toronto forced 15.1 turnovers per game (tied for seventh) and held opponents to 34.9% from three. Only three teams contested threes more effectively. If they can tighten up their corner coverage, that strength could grow.

There are quality defenders throughout the rotation. Poeltl anchors the middle as a reliable rim protector. Guards like Quickley and Shead bring energy despite being undersized. Barnes has flashed elite defensive potential but needs to be more consistent.

Murray-Boyles could also carve out minutes with his disruptive energy. He's a game-wrecker on this end.

Where Toronto must improve is on the glass. They ranked just 24th in defensive rebound rate (69.6%), giving opponents far too many putback chances.
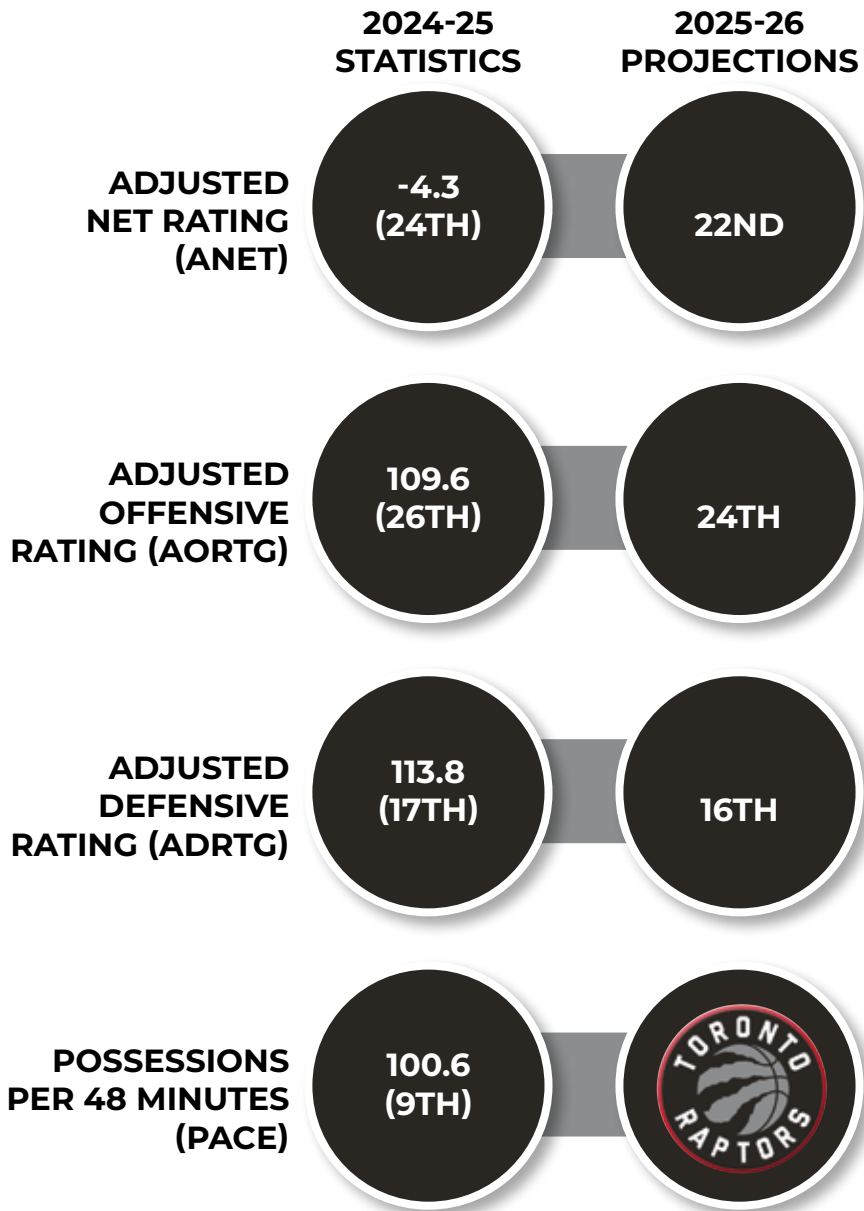
OUTLOOK
The Raptors are a fascinating futures team. The fit isn't perfect, but the mix of scorers and grinders stacks up well in the East.

How all the pieces blend remains to be seen, but having two borderline All-Stars and a solid supporting cast should at least produce an average team. And if Toronto is even half-decent, Scotiabank Arena becomes a tough road venue.

Given the state of the East, this feels like a 40-win team with upside to beat expectations in a big way. That puts alternate Overs in play. All of that would steady the organization after a bizarre offseason that saw Masai Ujiri ousted after the draft.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-4.3 (24TH)	22ND
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	109.6 (26TH)	24TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	113.8 (17TH)	16TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.6 (9TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION	OVER 38.5

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
300-1	80-1	25-1	+160/-200

UTAH
JAZZ

WESTERN CONFERENCE · NORTHWEST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 17-65 SU & 41-40-1 ATS, 47-34-1 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING **90.5**
(#30 of 30)

DID YOU KNOW...

UTAH WAS 9-21 SU BUT 19-11 ATS VERSUS EASTERN CONFERENCE FOES IN THE 2024-25 SEASON

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

Will Hardy hasn't had the roster to prove it yet, but he's one of the sharper tactical minds in the league. Coaches and diehards know it — just look at 2022-23, when Utah ranked 10th in adjusted offensive rating (115.6) despite a front office committed to tanking.

Unfortunately, the Jazz are still in that mode. Lauri Markkanen is the only established piece, and he's a prime trade candidate. He averaged 19.0 points and 5.9 rebounds last year, then put up 23.1 and 8.1 in another strong EuroBasket run. "The Finnisher" remains an elite floor-spacing big who punishes closeouts and has improved as a self-creator. He's also under contract for four more years, which makes him attractive to contenders. His presence almost makes Utah too competitive to tank — "almost" being the key word, especially after his frequent absences last season.

Utah doubled down on the youth movement by moving on from John Collins. Now, the franchise's future hinges on Ace Bailey, the No. 5 pick. Bailey underwhelmed at Rutgers (17.6 points, 7.2 boards on 46.0/34.6/69.2 splits), but the eye test shows a 6-foot-8 wing with pull-up shooting, elite athleticism, and natural scoring instincts. In

Hardy's system, he should find easy looks as a cutter, spot-up shooter, and secondary pick-and-roll option. Expect plenty of growing pains, but the upside is real.

The guard play is shakier. Isaiah Collier flashed playmaking brilliance, ranking in the 97th percentile in assist percentage (34.1%), but his 25.1% turnover rate was disastrous. Keyonte George averaged 16.8 points but shot just 39.1% from the field and 34.3% from deep. He may profile better as a long-term sixth man if his efficiency doesn't improve. Hoping to stabilize things, Utah spent the 18th pick on Walter Clayton Jr., the lead guard on Florida's title team. A confident scorer and leader, he'll get his chances right away.

Up front, Markkanen and Taylor Hendricks provide shooting and athletic finishing, while the center spot is a relative strength. Walker Kessler is more valuable defensively but finishes well and crashes the glass. Kyle Filipowski impressed as a rookie, shooting 35.0% from three and flashing creativity as a ball handler and post-up threat. Jusuf Nurkic is still around, though he's unlikely to factor heavily into the equation.

Cody Williams is another swing piece. His rookie year was a disaster, but his mobility and ball-handling at his size remain intriguing. If Hardy can restore his confidence, there's still upside.

Despite Hardy's ability to preach the right types of shots — Utah ranked sixth in three-point attempts last season (39.8) — expect more sloppy, inefficient basketball. The guards make too many mistakes, and the spacing isn't consistent. This will be another season of experimentation rather than results.

DEFENSE
The defense was even worse. Utah gave up a league-high 14.9 made threes per game and allowed opponents to shoot 69.5% at the rim, second-worst in the NBA. They were also 29th in transition defense, giving up 119.9 points per 100 possessions. Simply put, they were bad everywhere.

Some of that was the byproduct of youth and tanking, but little has changed. The point-of-attack defense is soft, leaving Kessler exposed on the back line. He's an excellent shot blocker, but there's only so much he can do when guards get blown by.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

|	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-8.4 (22ND)	30TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	110.7 (24TH)	28TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	119.1 (30TH)	30TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	100.8 (7TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

If Williams earns rotation minutes, his length and agility could help a bit. The same goes for John Tonje, the 53rd pick, though he's more likely to spend time in the G League. Realistically, though, this team is headed for another bottom-five finish on this end.

OUTLOOK
You need to be really bad to win fewer than 18 games, but the Jazz could get there. Hardy can coach and Markkanen is an All-Star-caliber talent, but the rest of the roster is nowhere near playoff-level. If Markkanen misses time — or gets moved — things could get ugly fast.

That said, there will still be betting value. Utah has historically been strong against the spread at home, and that's worth tracking early in the season. Player props will also be worth a look; someone has to put up numbers, even on a team this bad.
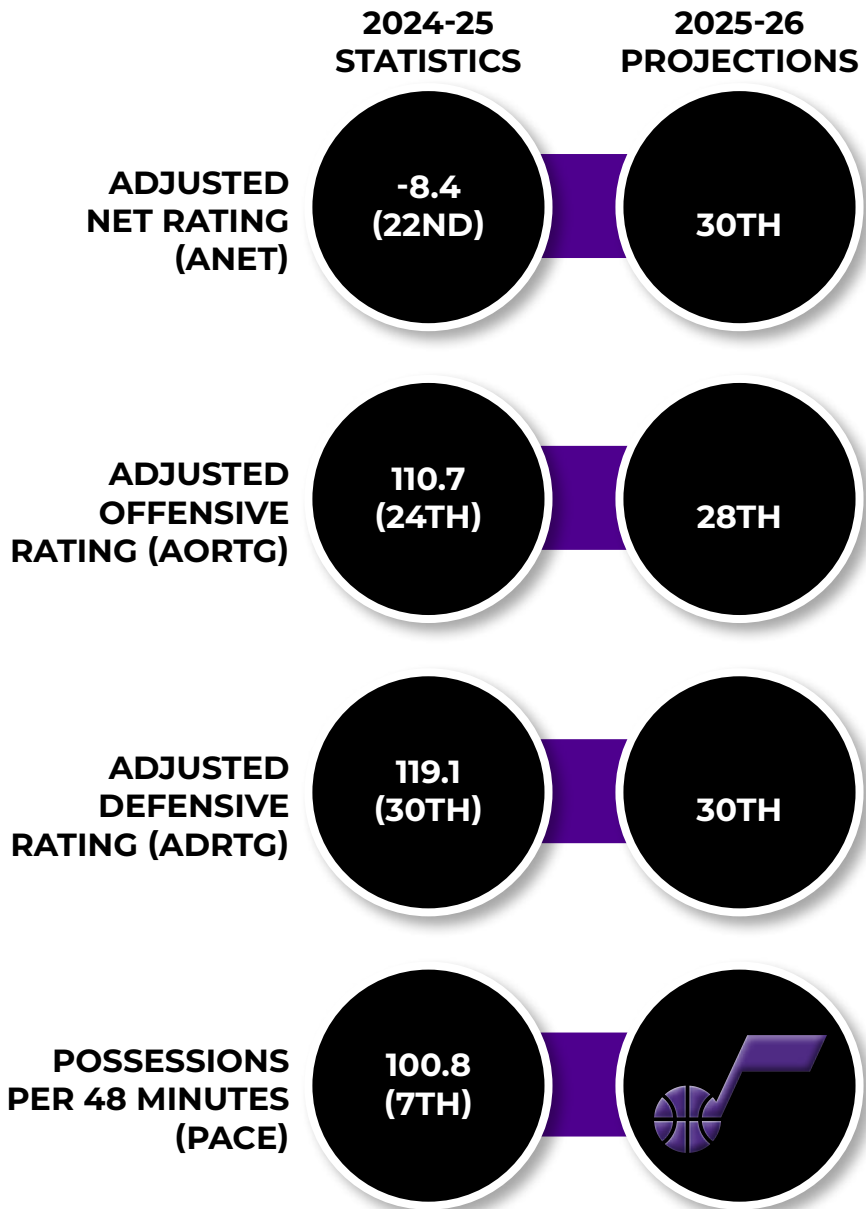
WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **UNDER 18.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
1000-1	600-1	600-1	30-1/-20000

WASHINGTON
WIZARDS

EASTERN CONFERENCE · SOUTHEAST DIVISION
2024-25 RECORDS: 18-64 SU & 34-46-2 ATS, 42-40 O-U

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING **91.0**
(#29 of 30)

OVERVIEW

OFFENSE

"Sloppy" sums up Washington's 2024-25 offense. The Wizards played at the league's fourth-fastest pace (101.8) but finished dead last in adjusted offensive efficiency (106.2). They ranked 26th in turnover rate (15.2) and 28th in effective field goal percentage (51.2%). In short, they were in a rush to do nothing — and there's no guarantee that changes.

Brian Keefe returns for his second full season as head coach, which feels uninspiring. In parts of two years, he's 26-95 in D.C. Keefe says the right things — hard-nosed defense, analytic-friendly shot selection, connectivity on both ends — but as a former interim, he wasn't meant to be in this seat long-term. Without clear progress, GM Will Dawkins will likely move on.

The franchise's most important piece is Alex Sarr, the No. 2 pick in the 2024 Draft. As a rookie, he averaged 13.0 points, 6.5 rebounds, and 2.4 assists, while shooting 39.4% from the field and 30.8% from three. His start was rocky, but his play trended upward and he finished closer to league average in Estimated Plus-Minus. With his jumper, face-up skills, and natural ability, Sarr has the makings of a cornerstone.

Bilal Coulibaly, the No. 7 pick in 2023, is also being counted on. Unfortunately, he'll miss the start of the season after thumb surgery. That's a setback, because the light came on late last year when he flashed the swiss-army toolkit that had people calling him a French Scottie Pippen. Washington will be hoping the momentum isn't lost.

The Wizards do have more young firepower. Bub Carrington (2024 first-rounder) averaged 9.8 points and 4.4 assists while showcasing serious shot creation. If his passing sharpens and his efficiency ticks up, he could be a good player. Tre Johnson, the No. 6 pick in 2025, is an even bigger prize. Johnson averaged 19.9 points as a freshman at Texas, emerging as one of the nation's best shooters and a confident three-level scorer.

DID YOU KNOW...

WASHINGTON WAS 14-54 SU & 25-41 ATS IN SHORTER REST SCENARIOS (0 OR 1 DAY) LAST SEASON

Kyshawn George, a 6-foot-8 wing, also showed some promise as a rookie. He's streaky, but his size, ball-handling, and outside shot give him a real chance to stick.

Cam Whitmore, Will Riley, and A.J. Johnson are three more young players worth monitoring. Whitmore flamed out in Houston but still brings size, athleticism, and shooting. Riley, a first-round pick in 2025, is a smooth forward with a picture-perfect stroke. Johnson is raw but drips upside at the guard spot.

To balance that youth, the Wizards added C.J. McCollum, Khris Middleton, and Corey Kispert — three pros who can produce while modeling professionalism. Last year, Washington tried surrounding its young players with veterans, but Jordan Poole and Kyle Kuzma weren't the right fits. This trio should help both on and off the floor.

Overall, expect more chaos offensively, but there's legitimate talent here. If Sarr, Johnson, and Coulibaly all grow, the foundation will be much stronger heading into 2026-27.

DEFENSE
Washington wasn't any better defensively than it was offensively last year. The Wizards finished 28th in adjusted defensive rating (114.7), allowed the fifth-most made threes per game (14.3), and ranked 29th in rebound rate (47.6%).

The problem is the roster construction. Too few players care about getting stops. Sarr is one of the few exceptions. He already looks like a special defender with his rim protection and mobility. His 5.0% block rate ranked seventh in the league, and his 1.5 blocks per game tied him for seventh overall. Avoiding fouls and sharpening his help positioning are the next steps, but the tools are elite.

Coulibaly and George also look good defensively. Coulibaly has the length, athleticism, and motor to be a high-level wing stopper. George isn't the best athlete, but he competes, understands schemes, and positions himself well.

But that's only three rotation players you can praise on this end. Everyone else struggles — on the ball, off the ball, or both. Effort and attention to detail are lacking, and there's little reason to think that will change.

Keefe will keep hammering the message that defense comes first, but he doesn't have the personnel — or the veteran buy-in — to back it up. McCollum has never been much of a defender, and Middleton's body doesn't allow him to dig in for stops anymore.
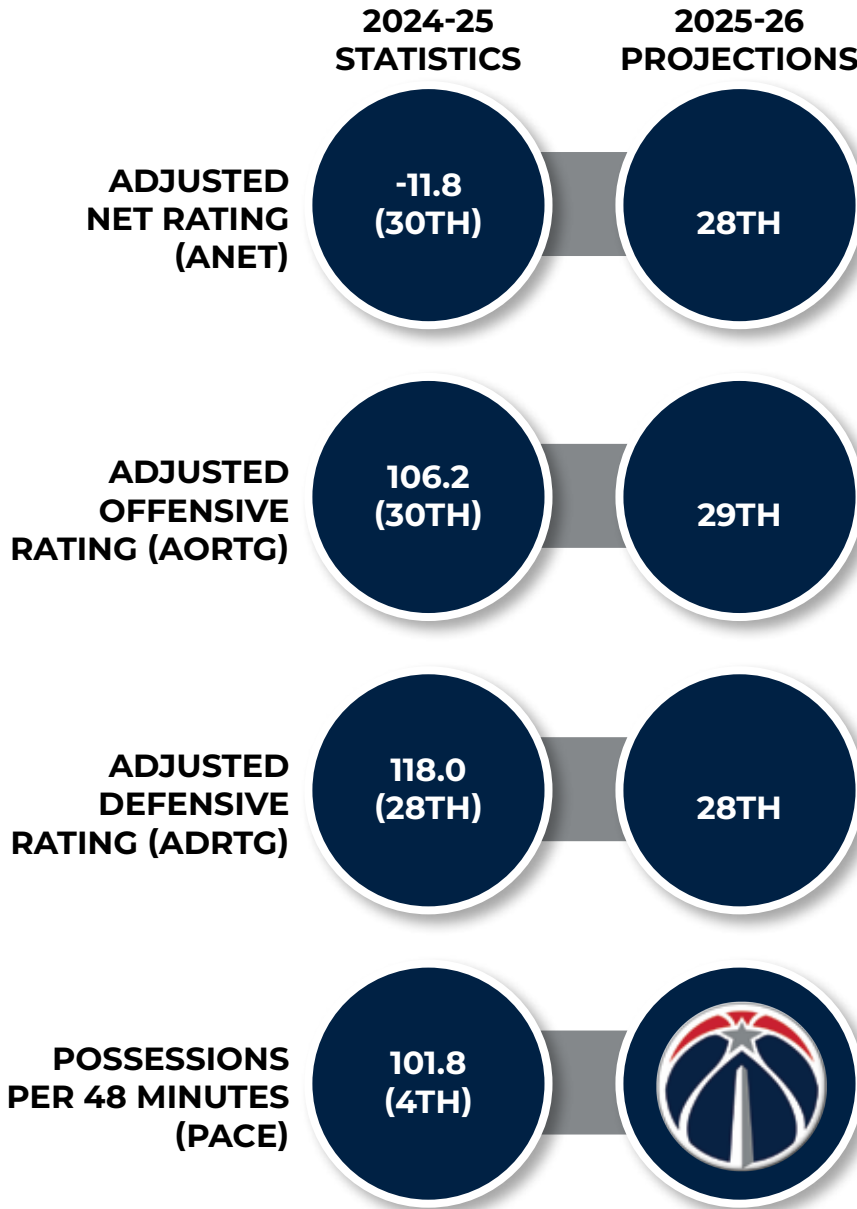
OUTLOOK
The question isn't whether Washington will be good — it's how bad they'll be. The Wizards need to win 21 or fewer games to go Under their win total, something they've managed in back-to-back seasons.

Long-term, there's reason for optimism. Sarr looks like a future franchise cornerstone, Johnson profiles as an ideal running mate, and a few other players have the potential to emerge as keepers. Plus, the veterans on this roster should help stabilize a young locker room.

But in the short term, this is still a roster without enough two-way contributors. Until Washington adds more defenders who actually hate losing, the lottery will remain their home. Maybe that's the point, considering the strength of the 2026 Draft class.

ADVANCED STATISTICS

	2024-25 STATISTICS	2025-26 PROJECTIONS
ADJUSTED NET RATING (ANET)	-11.8 (30TH)	28TH
ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING (AORTG)	106.2 (30TH)	29TH
ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING (ADRTG)	118.0 (28TH)	28TH
POSSESSIONS PER 48 MINUTES (PACE)	101.8 (4TH)	

Advanced stats from DunksAndThrees.com

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION **UNDER 21.5**

WIN NBA FINALS	WIN CONFERENCE	WIN DIVISION	MAKE/MISS PLAYOFFS
1000-1	500-1	300-1	22-1/-10000