

NBA BETTING GUIDE

VSIN **PRO**



HEAVY IS THE CROWN

JALEN BRUNSON'S KNICKS LOOK TO HOLD OFF A NEWLY LOADED EASTERN CONFERENCE

OUR **PRO** GUIDE INCLUDES

- KEY INSIGHTS AND BETTING TRENDS
- PREVIEWS OF ALL 30 TEAMS
- SEASON-LONG BEST BETS

VSIN

CONTENTS

FEATURES

- 3
- Welcome to the
2026-27 VSin NBA
Betting Guide
- 4
- VSin NBA Best Bets
- 10
- Can Kelley
Improve Again?
Betting Most
Improved Player
- 12
- How NBA's Lottery
Reform Could
Impact Betting
Regular Season
Win Totals
- 13
- Steve Makinen's
Power Ratings



ODDS WITHIN GUIDE COURTESY
OF CIRCA SPORTS AND
ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

TEAM INDEX

Atlanta Hawks	14
Boston Celtics.....	15
Brooklyn Nets.....	16
Charlotte Hornets	17
Chicago Bulls	18
Cleveland Cavaliers.....	19
Dallas Mavericks	20
Denver Nuggets	21
Detroit Pistons.....	22
Golden State Warriors	23
Houston Rockets.....	24
Indiana Pacers	25
Los Angeles Clippers.....	26
Los Angeles Lakers	27
Memphis Grizzlies	28
Miami Heat	29
Milwaukee Bucks.....	30
Minnesota Timberwolves	31
New Orleans Pelicans	32
New York Knicks.....	33
Oklahoma City Thunder.....	34
Orlando Magic.....	35
Philadelphia 76ers	36
Phoenix Suns	37
Portland Trail Blazers	38
Sacramento Kings.....	39
San Antonio Spurs	40
Toronto Raptors.....	41
Utah Jazz.....	42
Washington Wizards	43

VSIN STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

COVER:
DATABASE MANAGER: Jason Latus
LAYOUT AND DESIGN: Matt Devine
SENIOR EDITOR: Zachary Cohen
MANAGING EDITOR: Adam Burke

photos by USA Today Sports Images

WRITERS:
Kelley Bydlon Steve Makinen
and Jonathan Von Tobel

Advanced Team Stats Courtesy of
DunksAndThree.com

TEAM PREVIEWS
EASTERN CONFERENCE BY
ZACHARY COHEN

WESTERN CONFERENCE BY
JONATHAN VON TOBEL

With the start of the 2026-27 NBA season comes the start of New York's title defense. The Knicks ended a 53-year championship drought last season, and Jalen Brunson and Co. will now attempt to win two in a row. Unfortunately for them, they won't have it easy.

Philadelphia added Jaylen Brown and LeBron James to a core of Tyrese Maxey and Joel Embiid, Indiana has Tyrese Haliburton back from his torn Achilles, Boston has a ton of talent surrounding Jayson Tatum, Miami added Giannis Antetokounmpo, and Toronto brought Kawhi Leonard back. The Western Conference also remains a beast, with Oklahoma City and San Antonio leading the pack.

We get into all that, and more, in the VSiN NBA Betting Guide. Hopefully you found some profitable nuggets in last year's guide, but we're here to dish out some new ones. Keep reading for:

- Trends and power ratings, from Steve Makinen
- Best bets and futures, from VSiN hosts and analysts
- How Draft Lottery changes could affect win totals, from Zachary Cohen
- Most Improved Player handicapping, from Kelley Bydlon
- Eastern Conference previews and win total predictions, from Zachary Cohen
- Western Conference previews and win total predictions, from Jonathan Von Tobel

We are VSiN — The Sports Betting Network — available on SiriusXM Channel 189, the VSiN Watch App, on YouTube TV's Sports Plus package, our YouTube channel, radio affiliates, regional sports networks around the country, wherever you get your podcasts, and, of course, [VSiN.com](https://vsin.com).

We hope this guide gets you as excited as we are for the season, and we hope you remember to visit the website for daily best bets, player props (including our OptaAI projections), trends, and betting systems throughout the year.

And if you're a college basketball fan, make sure you stick around. Our VSiN College Basketball Betting Guide comes out October 26! With all of this preseason coverage, plus everything we're already doing for college football and the NFL, now is a great time to be a VSiN Pro subscriber.

Zachary Cohen
Senior Editor, VSiN.com
z.cohen@vsin.com
[@BettingOnX](#) on X



VSIN NBA

BEST BETS

JONATHAN VON TOBEL

I wrote up the Western Conference for this year's edition of the NBA Betting Guide. You'll see my win total recommendation for every team there, but the win totals I actually have in pocket are:

Denver Nuggets UN 48.5
Houston Rockets OV 47.5
Memphis Grizzlies OV 28.5

The rest of my futures are as follows:

ANTHONY EDWARDS TO BE NAMED FIRST TEAM ALL-NBA (+165)

I am a believer in what Minnesota put together in the offseason. LaMelo Ball completely opens the floor for this Timberwolves offense, and that means a much easier time for Edwards. Last season, Edwards posted career highs in points per game (28.8), field goal percentage (48.9%), and three-point percentage (39.9%). This season, with Ball as well as Dosunmu, the spacing should be much better for Edwards. I think he is on the verge of a monster season. But I do not know if it will be enough to unseat the media's view of Victor Wembanyama, Nikola Jokic, or Shai Gilgeous-Alexander. Last season, I took Wembanyama at just over 2-1 on this prop as a "Diet-MVP" bet. I will do the same with Edwards this season.

ACE BAILEY TO WIN 6TH MAN OF THE YEAR (30-1)

It is easy to forget that Utah has a fifth-overall pick just sitting on its bench after the offseason hype of selecting Darryn Peterson took over the storyline around this team. Bailey averaged 13.8 points and 4.2 rebounds in his rookie season and showed real growth as the season went along. Post-All-Star break, Bailey upped his scoring to 18.3 points per game and improved his rebound (4.9) and assist (2.0) averages. He will likely be coming off the bench for the Jazz this season, but given his growth and the potential of this team, I like his chances to be one of the most productive bench scorers in the league.

UTAH JAZZ TO WIN WESTERN CONFERENCE (150-1)

Mitch Moss and I banded together to make a friendship bet on Utah to win the Western Conference many months ago in the darkness of a local watering hole in Las Vegas. I stand by our bet. This team is going to be extremely good. Their backcourt is loaded with talent. From Keyonte George to Darryn Peterson to Ace Bailey. The frontcourt is huge and versatile, led by Lauri Markkanen and Jaren Jackson Jr. I would have loved this team even more if they had retained Walker Kessler, but that matters not. This team is being priced too low by the betting market, so I will take what I perceive to be immense value for a true dark horse in the Western Conference.

KELLEY BYDLON

ROCKETS OVER 47.5 WINS (-105) & ROCKETS TO WIN SOUTHWEST DIVISION (+750)

I do want to say right away that we need to be a little more cautious betting Overs this season, with tanking teams likely being a thing of the past. Or, at the very least, we won't see the aggressive level of tanking that we saw last year. Regardless, this is my favorite win total heading into the season.

The Rockets finished last season comfortably over this mark with 52 wins. During the regular season, they had the fifth-best net rating at Cleaning the Glass at +6.4. They were also a top-eight team on both offense and defense in adjusted ratings at Cleaning the Glass and Dunks & Threes.

They did end up playing one of the easier schedules in the league, but they were also without Fred VanVleet for the entire season, and I thought that would be a much bigger issue for this team than it ultimately was.

This season, you get VanVleet back, along with Steven Adams, who played in only 32 games last season before getting injured. Having both of those guys back should make this a much more versatile team when it comes to ball handling, creation, and rebounding.

The Rockets also added Marcus Smart and Bogdan Bogdanovic to the rotation. You'll hope to see continued growth from Amen Thompson, Jabari Smith Jr., and Reed Sheppard, but even if those guys simply play at last year's levels, I think they round out one of the best regular-season rosters in the NBA.

Secondary scoring and shooting alongside Kevin Durant will likely be an issue again when we get to the playoffs, but I think this win total is being affected too much by Houston's postseason failures last season.

I'll gladly take Over 47.5 wins here, and I'm going to sprinkle the division price. The Spurs are massive favorites to win the Southwest Division (-1200), as they should be, but if I like the idea of the Rockets pushing 50/55+ wins, then all it could take is a few weeks of injuries from Victor Wembanyama and this bet is live.

PISTONS UNDER 49.5 WINS (-115)

The Pistons were incredibly impressive last season, finishing with 60 wins and the best net rating in the Eastern Conference. I have major questions, though, about whether this team can come close to matching that level of success this season.

They made some smaller additions this offseason with John Collins and Isaiah Joe, but I think the losses of Isaiah Stewart and Tobias Harris could be even more impactful. Plus, you have this awkward contract situation with Jalen Duren hanging over the team to start the season.

With an increase in the overall quality of the Eastern Conference, I think 50 wins is a lot to ask of almost any team. Specifically, I think we see this Pistons team take a slight step back this season, so Under 49.5 is the bet for me.

JAZZ OVER 36.5 WINS (-120)

I know the Hardwood Handicappers group chat was eagerly awaiting the release of this win total. I might not be quite as in love with the bet as I was in July, but I still really like Over 36.5 wins for the Jazz.

This will be a COMPLETELY different-looking Jazz team this season.

No more tanking. Finally.

Lauri Markkanen finally gets some help, with Utah making a move for Jaren Jackson Jr. Those two, along with 2026 Most Improved Player candidate Keyonte George, will make up the core of this team. They'll also be surrounded by Rookie of the Year candidate Darryn Peterson and second-year wing Ace Bailey.

This team will be big, and I think it has the potential to be a top-10 offense.

The issues will come on the defensive side of the ball, where there isn't much to like beyond Jackson Jr. I was very sad to see Walker Kessler shipped out. Ball handling and creation could be issues as well.

But when I put it all together, I still think this is a team capable of pushing 40 wins. At 36.5, I'm betting the Over.

BULLS OVER 28.5 WINS (-120) & BULLS ALT 35+ WINS (+400)

The Jazz were already masters at it, but thank God the Bulls finally learned how to tank and got out of the damn Play-In Tournament last year.

They did what needed to be done and landed the fourth pick in the draft, where they selected forward Caleb Wilson. Like Peterson in Utah, Wilson enters the season as one of the preseason favorites for Rookie of the Year (+350 at DraftKings).

The Bulls also added Norman Powell and Nic Claxton this offseason, which I think rounds out a pretty good starting five. Josh Giddey will be

back running the show at point guard, and I think third-year forward Matas Buzelis is primed for a breakout season and is a great candidate for Most Improved Player.

The depth is lacking, for sure, and that's my biggest concern with this bet. But I think there is enough offensive talent here for Chicago to clear this relatively low number and get to 30+ wins.

Over 28.5 for me, and a sprinkle on 35+ wins at +400.

ZACHARY COHEN

I wrote up the Eastern Conference for this guide, so you'll see some predictions from me there. However, the win totals I actually took in the conference were: Heat Over 45.5 Wins (-110), Magic Over 43.5 Wins (-115), Wizards Over 33.5 Wins (-115), Cavaliers Over 47.5 Wins (-115), Pacers Over 43.5 Wins (-110), Nets Over 23.5 Wins (-120), and Celtics Over 50.5 Wins (+100). All of my win total plays are 2U plays.

I also have two futures I gave out on Hardwood Handicappers over the summer: Celtics To Win NBA Title (14-1) and Rockets To Win NBA Title (60-1). The Houston play is a half-unit play.

Here are some of my new ones:

CELTICS ALT WINS 55+ (+225) & MOST REGULAR SEASON WINS (30-1 - 0.25 UNITS)

Jaylen Brown just had one of the best seasons of his career, averaging 28.7 points, 6.9 rebounds, and 5.1 assists per game as the focal point of a 56-win Boston team. He's a fantastic player, and he'll likely thrive in Philadelphia. So, to an extent, I understand why people are freaking out about the Celtics. However, this Boston team should at least be fine when it comes to playing at a high level in the regular season.

Last year, the Celtics were 41-21 before Jayson Tatum returned from the torn Achilles he suffered in the previous postseason. That 41-21 mark meant that Boston was playing at a 54-win pace with Brown leading a Tatum-less pack. Well, perhaps I'm oversimplifying things, but wouldn't any team in the league trade Brown for a package of Tatum, Paul George, and Mitchell Robinson? And wouldn't that team improve? In a way, that's exactly what's happening here.

Boston will begin a full 82-game season with those three players in Brown's place, and the team will do so with Neemias Queta, Baylor Scheierman, Payton Pritchard, Jordan Walsh, and Hugo Gonzalez all being a little further along in their development. We have also seen that Joe Mazzulla's style of play is highly productive in the regular season.

There's just no way I'm pushing the panic button with Boston. This team should cruise to 51 wins, which is the team's season win total this year. I also believe 55+ is well within reason, and it genuinely wouldn't shock me if this is the best team in basketball heading into the playoffs.

PELICANS OVER 27.5 WINS (-115 - 2 UNITS)

It won't be fun rooting for New Orleans this season, but this number looks too low to me. The Pelicans have a ton of talent on their roster, a front office with zero interest in racing to the bottom of the standings, and a new, no-nonsense coach in Jamahl Mosley.

I expect this to be a much better defensive team than last year, even if the group still finishes in the bottom 10 of the standings in Adjusted Defensive Rating. Mosley pumped out nothing but elite defenses with Orlando, so there should at least be some structure in New Orleans this year.

Having Dejounte Murray back for the start of the season should also drastically improve the way this team operates offensively. He came back from his torn Achilles on February 24 last season, and he surprised people with how well he played. With a full offseason to continue working on his body, Murray should be back to 100% when the regular season starts.

Of course, there's no guarantee we see another 62 games out of Zion Williamson. He hasn't been able to stay healthy throughout his career, and it's statistically unlikely he'll play 60+ games again. Having said that, Williamson lost even more weight after last season, and he looks to be in awesome shape.

Realistically, this is a bet on names on a piece of paper, as there's a bunch of good basketball players on this roster, and that has never amounted to anything. But I'm banking on Mosley doing a decent job, the arrival of Benneidict Mathurin giving this team another scoring punch, and the development of young players like Jeremiah Fears and Derik Queen. It would take some absolutely miserable-looking ball for a depth chart like this to fall short of 28 wins. I think we might see them in the Play-In Tournament.

SEAN SWEENEY TO WIN COACH OF THE YEAR (15-1)

I was all over the Magic heading into last season, believing Desmond Bane could help Orlando make a major leap in the Eastern Conference. Obviously, that didn't end up being the case. The Magic snuck into the postseason through the Play-In Tournament, and they were ultimately bounced by the top-seeded Pistons. That led to the dismissal of Jamahl Mosley.

The interesting thing is that the front office didn't blow this thing up. Instead, Orlando brought in Sweeney, San Antonio's lead assistant, to give this core another shot.

Sweeney, an elite defensive mind, should get Orlando back to playing like a top-10 team defensively. And a new voice shouldn't hurt in trying to get a little more out of the pairing of Franz Wagner and Paolo Banchero.

Honestly, for as bad as things were last season, Orlando still won 45 games. The Magic did that despite Wagner missing 48 games and Suggs missing 25. If the Magic were just a touch healthier, they might have won 50 games. So, just better injury luck can make Sweeney look quite good in his first year in Florida. Then, if some of the strings he pulls pay off, that's even better.

In a way, I'm just betting that I was a year early with my love for Orlando's roster. I already did that in taking the Magic Over 43.5 wins, but I love the 15-1 number for Sweeney. Several shops aren't being as kind with their odds. Also, while I love Darko Rajakovic as the betting favorite in this market, I think it's a good year to take some shots further down the board. A lot of the guys near the top of the oddsboard are already established. They're less likely to win than a shiny new toy.

If Orlando can get in the 50-win range, we'll be extremely live with this.

DAVE TULEY

76ERS UNDER 50 WINS (CIRCA)

When LeBron James decided to take his talents to Philadelphia in July, the sportsbooks made the 76ers the second betting favorite in the Eastern Conference, and they're now priced right around the same as the defending champion Knicks. I've been looking for a way to fade that move as it's pretty clear James is on the downside of his career and can't carry a team on his back anymore. I'm not willing to lay -1350 on the 76ers to not win the NBA title, and obviously they've got enough other talent with Joel Embiid (if he stays healthy, which is always a concern), Tyrese Maxey, and Jaylen Brown to not be willing to pick them to not make the playoffs, despite the juicy price of +580. However, I'm going to fade them and go Under 50 wins. Last year, Philadelphia went 45-37, and I'm not seeing the addition of James and Brown improving them by more than five wins, especially when this could turn into a "load-management" scenario where a veteran team's goal is to just get to the playoffs and not worry about seeding, especially if there are stretches of the regular season missed by Embiid or others.





AARON MOORE

I approach NBA futures hoping for a tip-in near the rim, not necessarily deep corner 3s. The focus being relatively short-priced plays that are realistic to win based on multiple factors working in their favor.

POINTS PER GAME H2H:

AJ DYBANTSA (+135) OVER DARRYN PETERSON (-160)

The No. 1 pick in the draft is available at a plus number here based primarily on the widely discussed narrative that Peterson was the better scorer in college and didn't go first overall because of lingering injury concerns.

Even if a bettor subscribes to that notion, Dybantsa, playing for the ever-rebuilding Wizards, has the more optimal situation to showcase his scoring than Peterson.

When Dybantsa's teammates Anthony Davis and Trae Young inevitably miss time, and you know they will, the BYU star will get the green light even more, so Washington can showcase its most valuable commodity to promote what the future may hold for the franchise.

A deeper lineup in Utah, including Ace Bailey in the backcourt, means the Jazz won't be as dependent on Peterson's scoring as his former Jayhawks were.

DraftKings' futures board to make the playoffs lists the Jazz (+130) as the first team outside of the minus-odds territory, while Washington comes in at +310. Therefore, I am backing the scorer who will get more time to play with lesser stakes compared to the one on a team looking to win now.

LEBRON JAMES TO RECORD 4+ TRIPLE DOUBLES DURING REGULAR SEASON (+125) & JAYLEN BROWN 15+ REBOUNDS IN ANY GAME DURING REGULAR SEASON (+200)

These two plays are somewhat connected since they deal with the logic that Philadelphia's new superstars will have plenty of motivation to earn their own headlines and accolades. Both of these accomplishments are congruent with the belief that James and Brown will work alongside the rest of the Philadelphia roster. Last season, James had three triple-doubles, so one more is needed for this to cash. James has made it clear that legacy and still being valued as an elite player are important to him, so he should be able to sniff out a few more boards when the triple-double is in sight.

Last season, Brown did get a season-high 15 rebounds in a game. This year, he might be asked to rebound even more for the Sixers, especially during games when Joel Embiid is unavailable.

MORE REGULAR SEASON WINS:

HOUSTON (-130) OVER LA LAKERS (+105)

The Lakers have Luka Doncic on a roster otherwise filled with transition and questions. Doncic missing just minimal time can immediately alter the Lakers' expected win total of 45.5. Conversely, the Rockets have a younger roster that can still keep them on track for 47.5 wins if Kevin Durant loses some games to injury. Alperen Sengun playing over 70 games the past two seasons is another reason to back Houston over the course of the year.

ADAM BURKE

UTAH JAZZ OVER 36.5 WINS (-120)

This is obviously a big leap from a team that won just 22 games last season, but the Jazz, who were 1-15 in division games, were among those racing to the bottom late in the season. They lost 10 of their last 11 and dealt with injuries all season long. This also wasn't a team that represented the current state of NBA offense particularly well.



The Jazz only took 18.7% of their field goal attempts inside three feet, and 40.2% of their shots were three-pointers, leaving way too many shot attempts in the mid-range. Not only did they not get to the rim much, but they were a bottom-10 team in shooting percentage when they did. Pair that with a borderline bottom-five 3P%, and you're talking about a rough set of numbers, especially for a team that was third in Pace per Basketball-Reference.

Along with an inefficient offensive philosophy, the Jazz were one of the worst defensive teams in the league. Over the summer, Utah added a really good rebounder and interior piece in Jusuf Nurkic, plus they still get to build off of what they saw last season from Ace Bailey and others. Lauri Markkanen averaged 26.7 PPG but played under 50 games for the second straight season, and Jaren Jackson Jr. only played in three games for the Jazz.

This roster is a lot better and, while likely inconsistent with some young guys, including Darryn Peterson, this should be a stronger, more competitive team.



NICK WHALEN

BRANDON MILLER TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (13-1)

The MIP market is loaded with intriguing options — I don't mind Collin Murray-Boyles at 22-1 or Matas Buzelis at 35-1 — but Miller is still a value as the second-shortest shot behind Dylan Harper (+900). Looking back at who's won this award over the last decade-plus, Miller fits the profile of an ascending player who could still make a leap into clear All-Star territory. Going all the way back to 2008-09, 15 of the last 18 winners have been between age 22 and 25 — Miller turns 24 in November — with the majority of that group in their third or fourth year in the league. Miller has posted back-to-back 20-plus-points-per-game seasons, but with Charlotte shaking things up and moving on from LaMelo Ball and Miles Bridges, Miller will be in position to operate as the No. 1 option and could push closer to 25+ points per game. Keep in mind, he played only 30.3 MPG a year ago. That figure could rise considerably this season.



CAVALIERS TO WIN CENTRAL DIVISION (+160)

While the Cavs may have lost out on LeBron James, this is still one of the deepest and most stable rosters in the Eastern Conference. It remains to be seen if Cleveland truly has an NBA Finals ceiling, but there's no question this roster is constructed to win regular-season games. Donovan Mitchell, James Harden, Evan Mobley, and Jarrett Allen all have solid health track records, while Peyton Watson adds some insurance — and upside — to the wing rotation. I'm higher than market on the Cavs, and lower on the Pistons, who loom as the primary threat in the Central coming off of a 60-win season. Indiana could be in the mix (43.5 win total), as well, but at a nice plus-money price, I'll jump on the Cavaliers to exceed 50 wins and take the division.

MAVERICKS OVER 33.5 WINS (-105)

The Mavs got to only 26 wins a year ago, but they were seven games under .500 through 45 games before dropping 30 of their final 37 contests. Cooper Flagg missed a stretch of time. Anthony Davis got hurt in January and then was traded — essentially, the Mavs were fine pulling the plug on the season and playing the lottery. Dallas was also without a real point guard for most of last season, and the return of Kyrie Irving should solve that issue. It's fair to question how many games Irving will play, but if he can get to even 55 or 60, that will go down as a win. Beyond Irving and Flagg, it remains to be seen how the rotation will shake out, but I like the Mavs' depth up front and expect another leap from Flagg, who averaged 25-7-5 with a steal and a block per game on 46% shooting over his final 25 games. Obviously, the Western Conference is a beast at the top, but I have Dallas ahead of teams like the Clippers, Pelicans, Kings, Grizzlies, and perhaps even the Warriors. If Flagg and Irving stay (relatively) healthy, pushing for a Play-In spot isn't out of the question.

WES REYNOLDS

INDIANA PACERS OVER 43.5 WINS (-110 AT BETMGM)

Sixteen months ago, the Indiana Pacers were in Game 7 of the NBA Finals against an Oklahoma City Thunder team that won 68 regular-season games (tied for fifth-most in league history). Then, it all unraveled when Tyrese Haliburton suffered a torn right Achilles tendon just several minutes into the first quarter. Haliburton missed the entire 2025-26 season, and then early-season injuries to other key contributors, plus losing Myles Turner to free agency the previous summer, led the Pacers to pivot and become a tanker.

Midseason, the Pacers made a trade with the Clippers for Ivica Zubac, who played just five games before a fractured rib and the ongoing tank process led him to miss the rest of the season. Indiana ended up 19-63 but ended up losing its first-round pick in the trade because it did not remain in the top four for the NBA Draft Lottery. Needless to say, the loss of that pick plus losing pending free agent Benedict Mathurin was a heavy price to pay, but the Pacers look to be the clear forgotten team in the Eastern Conference pecking order.

One, Haliburton returns after recovering from the injury. More than likely, he will need some games to get back into form, but the overwhelming majority of his running mates from that run to the NBA Finals return, including Pascal Siakam, off an All-Star season, Andrew Nembhard, Aaron Nesmith, Obi Toppin, and TJ McConnell.

Next, while Zubac is a substantially different player than Turner, he will provide more offense and rebounding in the post. "Zu" has not been known as much of a pick-and-roll guy, but never really was able to do that with the Clippers due to James Harden and Kawhi Leonard being mid-range merchants. He will not be a lane-clogger like he was in L.A. because the offense is more spread out in Rick Carlisle's system, and the Pacers have more shooters. Carlisle is also one of the better coaches in the league and will certainly show some new concepts offensively that teams have not seen with this group. He could also be a sneaky under-the-radar Coach of the Year bet (16-1 at BetMGM) behind Darko Rajakovic (Toronto), Erik Spoelstra (Miami), and Nick Nurse (Philadelphia), who all have lower odds in the East but also much higher expectations.

Last year's tank also allowed some younger players like 2023 lottery pick Jarace Walker to get more minutes and establish a prominent role in the rotation. Furthermore, the Pacers added some quality depth with Kelly Oubre Jr., who gives them a versatile wing defender and some scoring punch off the bench.

Indiana is currently priced eighth in the East. While Toronto, Philadelphia, Boston, and Miami recently made significant trades and free-agent moves, this is a proven group that none of the national media are focused upon and is a true sleeper.

PAYTON PRITCHARD TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (15-1 AT FANATICS)

Last year's Sixth Man of the Year now gets his turn to be the primary playmaker for the Celtics with the trade of Jaylen Brown to Philadelphia. Pritchard posted his best marks last season where he averaged 17 points per game on 46.4% shooting from the floor (37.7% from three-point range) across 79 games (50 starts). He also averaged 5.2 assists and 3.9 rebounds, both of which were career highs. Keep in mind that he gave this production without Jayson Tatum for most of the season, but now Tatum is back, which should dramatically improve his assist numbers, plus he now has full starter minutes.

Furthermore, Mike Conley Jr.'s signing as a free agent can only help Pritchard, as the 38-year-old is the consummate professional point guard and a heck of a mentor for a player getting the keys to the car.

In addition, Pritchard will still be counted on as a scorer and likely take some pressure off Derrick White, who posted his lowest shooting percentages last season of his five-year tenure in Boston.

There are also injury factors here, as Paul George (acquired in the Brown trade) has only played more than 56 regular-season games once in the last seven seasons, while Tatum may get some "load-management" games, having only played 22 total games since returning

from an Achilles injury last March. Joe Mazzulla knows he can count on Pritchard for scoring, especially on the nights where Tatum sits out.

DUSTIN SWEDELSON

ANTHONY EDWARDS TO WIN MVP (20-1)

I've been someone who has pushed back on some of the Anthony Edwards hype over the years. But this season feels different.

Minnesota has a new look. Julius Randle and Naz Reid are gone, taking a combined 34.7 points per game with them. That leaves a massive scoring void for the Timberwolves to fill, and Edwards is the obvious candidate to absorb a significant portion of it.

But the biggest reason I believe Edwards could finally reach MVP level is the addition of LaMelo Ball.

Edwards has spent too much energy over the years creating his own offense. Last season, he ranked sixth in the NBA in self-created three-point attempts. Adding an elite facilitator like Ball should alleviate some of that burden, allowing Edwards to conserve energy over the course of the season while also creating easier scoring opportunities.

More importantly, Ball allows Edwards to play off the ball more often and showcase an area of his game that hasn't been utilized nearly enough. Edwards shot 47.8% on catch-and-shoot three-pointers last season, third-best in the NBA among players with at least 100 attempts.

None of this means Edwards will suddenly stop creating his own offense. He'll still be Minnesota's go-to guy in crunch time and call his own number plenty. The difference is that he won't have to manufacture everything himself.

Ball should create easier looks for Edwards while also helping Minnesota play faster and spend less time grinding through possessions in the half court. Edwards averaged 28.8 points per game last season. With some of the scoring that left with Randle and Reid now available to him, combined with easier opportunities created by Ball, there's no reason he can't push that number north of 30 while becoming more efficient in the process.

And that brings us to the other half of the MVP equation: winning.

Minnesota won 49 games last season. I think this new-look roster has a chance to be better. If Edwards can average 30+ points per game with elite efficiency while the Timberwolves make the jump from 49 wins into the mid-to-high 50s and establish themselves as one of the best teams in the Western Conference, suddenly his resume starts to look a lot like the profile we've seen from recent MVP winners.

Minnesota may have finally constructed a roster that allows Edwards to work less for his offense while producing more. If that happens, he'll have a legitimate chance to win it.



A basketball player in a red Bulls jersey with the number 14 is shown in a dynamic pose, shouting with his mouth open. He is wearing a red jersey with "BULLS" and "14" in white and black lettering. The jersey also features a Nike swoosh and a Motorola logo. He is wearing red shorts with a white and black stripe at the bottom and a Bulls logo on the side. He has a tattoo on his left forearm. The background is a blurred crowd in a stadium.

CAN KELLEY IMPROVE AGAIN? BETTING MOST IMPROVED PLAYER

by Kelley Bydlon

Betting on awards in any sport can be maddening. You're handicapping what a group of voters will think as much as what happens on the court or field. But if you can figure out what those voters value, awards markets can be extremely profitable.

For me, the NBA's Most Improved Player award has been more profitable than any other awards market over the last 10 years, and it's not close. I cashed bets at good odds on Tyrese Maxey, Ja Morant, and Julius Randle in their winning seasons. I got cocky. I thought I had this award figured out. Then a couple of Hawks came along, and my head has been spinning ever since.

Should I have seen it coming? Has the winning player profile changed? Let's sort through that before getting to this season's candidates.

WHAT DID I MISS?

Rewind to January 2025. I was coming off a season in which I cashed Maxey at 20-1. Before the next season, I made one MIP bet: Cade Cunningham at 22-1. I thought he fit the profile perfectly and wrote about the pick in the VSin betting guide.

By the time the All-Star break approached, Cunningham was an odds-on favorite. He stayed that way until April 1. Then Dyson Daniels — the Great Barrier Thief — swooped in and stole the thing.

Daniels had a great season. He averaged 3.0 steals per game and finished second in Defensive Player of the Year voting. He also made a big jump in scoring, and it was only his third season, which matters to me. But his resume looked different from those of the recent MIP winners I had been targeting.

I had come to expect a young player making a star-level offensive leap. Cunningham went from 22.7 to 26.1 points per game while becoming the Pistons' lead star. The season before, Maxey jumped from 20.3 to 25.9 and cemented himself as a star alongside Joel Embiid. Morant, Randle, and Brandon Ingram followed a similar path: a substantial scoring jump into the mid-to-high 20s.

So why Daniels? Maybe voters wanted another way to recognize an elite defender. Maybe the vocal support he received from respected bettors and media members on social media played a role. Whatever the reason, his win made me question whether I understood the voters as well as I thought I did.

I approached the market cautiously the following season. I had a small early position on Austin Reaves, then took a late swing on Jalen Duren. Neither worked. The award went to another first-year Atlanta Hawk: Nickeil Alexander-Walker.

Alexander-Walker's jump from 9.4 to 20.8 points per game after moving into a starting role was massive. Still, a winner in his seventh season surprised me, especially with strong cases for Duren, Jalen Johnson, and Deni Avdija. Those players were younger and fit the career arcs I usually target.

Do two straight seasons mean my old approach is dead? Maybe. Voters appear more willing to reward different kinds of improvement, and I'll account for that going forward. It was a big reason I backed off last season.

But looking at this season's odds, I'm surprised by some of the names at the top of the board. I see better bets further down.

THE PROFILE I'M STILL BETTING

I usually want a player in his third through fifth season who is already somewhat established and poised for a major offensive leap. Think of a young star beginning to emerge, as Maxey and Morant did. Over the last 10 seasons, the average winner was 24 years old, scored 22 points per game and increased his scoring by six points per game from the previous season.

There's one more rule I follow because voters have said it aloud: No second-year players.

The thinking is that good rookies are expected to improve in Year 2. You could argue that the same logic should extend to Years 3 and 4, but I'm sticking with what I've heard voters say. No second-year player has won since Monta Ellis in 2007.

So why in the hell is second-year Spurs guard Dylan Harper the +900 favorite at DraftKings?

Harper is amazing. Playing alongside Victor Wembanyama, he might have the kind of second season that finally breaks this pattern. But I'm going to make him — and the voters — prove it to me.

I'm also crossing these second-year players off my list at their current prices: Collin Murray-Boyles, Khaman Maluach, Egor Demin, VJ Edgecombe, Cedric Coward, Derik Queen, and Carter Bryant.

That creates an opening elsewhere on the board.

Brandon Miller at 12-1 has a compelling case. He's entering his fourth season in Charlotte and should have plenty of opportunity to boost his scoring with LaMelo Ball gone. I can also see arguments for Kel'el Ware, Walker Kessler, and Jaden McDaniels. But I landed on someone at a longer price...

MY FAVORITE BET: MATAS BUZELIS, 40-1

THE THIRD-YEAR LITHUANIAN IS SET UP FOR A BIG SEASON IN CHICAGO. THE BULLS FINALLY STOPPED SCREWING AROUND LAST SEASON AND AVOIDED THE DAMN PLAY-IN TOURNAMENT. THEY LANDED A STRONG LOTTERY SPOT AND DRAFTED NORTH CAROLINA FORWARD CALEB WILSON.

I'M HIGH ON WILSON AND THINK HE HAS A REAL SHOT AT ROOKIE OF THE YEAR. HE COULD TAKE SOME ATTENTION AWAY FROM BUZELIS, BUT THAT DOESN'T WORRY ME MUCH RIGHT NOW. I EXPECT BOTH TO HELP AN IMPROVED BULLS TEAM WITH A PRETTY DAMN GOOD STARTING LINEUP ALONGSIDE JOSH GIDDEY, NORMAN POWELL, AND NIC CLAXTON. I BET CHICAGO OVER 28.5 WINS. IF BUZELIS IS IN THE MIP CONVERSATION AT SEASON'S END, THE BULLS WILL LIKELY CLEAR THAT NUMBER COMFORTABLY.

BUZELIS AVERAGED 16.3 POINTS IN 29.4 MINUTES PER GAME LAST SEASON WITH A 24.0% USAGE RATE. HE SHOT 35% FROM THREE, PULLED DOWN 5.8 REBOUNDS, AND HANDED OUT 2.1 ASSISTS PER GAME. IF THOSE NUMBERS RISE A BIT AND HIS SCORING CLIMBS INTO THE 20S, I LOVE THE CASE AT 40-1.

GIDDEY CAN SET HIM UP, AND THE ADDITIONS OF POWELL AND WILSON SHOULD MAKE IT HARDER FOR DEFENSES TO FOCUS ON BUZELIS. THAT COULD MEAN MORE CLEAN LOOKS FROM THREE FOR BUZELIS, WHO ALREADY ATTEMPTED 6.4 PER GAME LAST SEASON.

HOPEFULLY, THIS IS THE YEAR I GET BACK ON TRACK WITH MIP — AND DON'T LOSE TO ANOTHER DAMN HAWK.

HOW NBA'S LOTTERY REFORM COULD IMPACT BETTING REGULAR SEASON WIN TOTALS

by Zachary Cohen

last season, but it also traded for Trae Young and Anthony Davis in hopes of turning things around in 2026-27. At the time, I called those “win-later” deals. Then, in the offseason, the Wizards added productive veterans in Khris Middleton and Deandre Ayton, signaling a desire to win games and possibly give their young core a taste of the postseason. That change in roster construction has Washington’s win total at 35.5, a sizable jump from last year’s 21.5.

We also saw the Nets, normally a team content to finish near the bottom, take on Julius Randle’s salary. That was a cost-cutting move for Minnesota, and Brooklyn received a pick for absorbing him. Still, Randle averaged 21.1 points, 6.7 rebounds, and 5.0 assists per game last year, and the team surely views him as a piece who can keep it out of the relegation zone.

Even Chicago can be viewed as an example. The Bulls looked to be finally embracing a youth movement: They changed up the front office, hired Tiago Splitter as head coach, and added Caleb Wilson to an impressive young core. Chicago easily could have used this season to throw the kids out there and let them make mistakes. Instead, the Bulls brought in veteran Norman Powell, a perfect fit as a floor-spacing two-guard, to help right away.

The big question now: How will this impact betting? My view is that taking a close look at Overs on the league’s lowest totals could be a great place to start. Winning games at a 20% clip in the second half of the season is no longer beneficial to teams. Even for a team like Sacramento, that could be the difference between winning 19 games and winning 25.

This could also make some Unders more enticing. In each of the last three seasons, we have seen elite teams flirting with 65+ victories. Will that remain the norm with fewer freebies on the schedule?

I’d also look to get aggressive with some middle-of-the-pack teams you’re looking to fade. For me, that’s a team like the Blazers. With so many question marks in the backcourt, are we 100% sure Portland is head-and-shoulders above some of the teams with lower win totals? In recent seasons, the Blazers have had their foot on the gas while other teams have backed off. What if an increase in league-wide competitive spirit completely changes the way we view everyone?

Injuries are the obvious exception. Indiana’s collapse started with the torn Achilles Tyrese Haliburton suffered in the NBA Finals two years ago. However, last season spiraled with injuries to other key players, and the new rules can’t fix that.

Teams ranked fourth through 10th worst also keep their lottery odds, so there’s a chance we see a lighter tank as the picture clears up late in the season.

Still, if the rules work, we should see some surprising overachievers, and we’ll also see some major disappointments. The oddsmakers obviously tried to bake this in as best they can. If we’re thinking of something, they’re doing the same — and likely doing it much better. But Year 1 is the right time to see if we can find an edge.

For years, we have watched some of the league’s worst teams perform at a middle-school level in hopes of improving their chances of landing one of the top picks in the NBA Draft.

Last season was especially ugly. After the All-Star break, the Wizards went 3-26, the Jazz 4-22, the Pacers 4-23, and the Grizzlies 5-24. Sure, some of those teams were either banged up or flat-out bad. However, they also had every reason to lose. In fact, the league came down on some of them. Utah was fined \$500,000 and Indiana \$100,000 for suspicious roster management. At the same time, one can argue the nonsense was worth it. The Pacers lost their pick to the Clippers, but the Jazz got the No. 2 selection and added a potential franchise-changing guard in Darryn Peterson. Meanwhile, the Wizards secured the top selection and landed a high-quality wing in AJ Dybantsa. Washington didn’t quite bend the rules like others, but Carlton “Bub” Carrington recently said the team was “held back just because we were trying to get AJ Dybantsa. That’s no secret.”

All of this put a stain on the league, so NBA commissioner Adam Silver set out to find a solution.

The new “3-2-1 Lottery” will be in effect for the next three seasons. Here’s what it looks like:

- The lottery expands from 14 teams to 16.
- Teams that miss the playoffs and the Play-In get flatter odds.
- The three worst teams are “relegated” and lose a lottery ball. They can fall no further than No. 12.
- No team can pick first in consecutive drafts.
- Newly traded picks can’t carry heavy protections.
- The league office can alter lottery odds, move a team’s draft slot, and dish out heavy fines for tanking.

Losing the most games used to get you a better shot at drafting a franchise player. Now it can get you a worse pick and a scary call from the league office.

Teams have already adjusted. Washington might have deliberately tanked

STEVE MAKINEN'S POWER RATINGS

TEAM	POWER RATING
OKLAHOMA CITY	104.0
SAN ANTONIO	103.5
NEW YORK	103.0
PHILADELPHIA	101.5
BOSTON	101.0
DENVER	101.0
DETROIT	101.0
MINNESOTA	101.0
CLEVELAND	100.5
LA LAKERS	100.5
HOUSTON	100.0
TORONTO	100.0
ATLANTA	99.0
INDIANA	99.0
MIAMI	99.0
ORLANDO	98.5
GOLDEN STATE	97.5
CHARLOTTE	97.0
PHOENIX	97.0
PORTLAND	97.0
UTAH	97.0
WASHINGTON	95.5
MEMPHIS	95.2
DALLAS	95.0
LA CLIPPERS	94.5
BROOKLYN	93.0
CHICAGO	93.0
NEW ORLEANS	93.0
MILWAUKEE	91.5
SACRAMENTO	90.5



ATLANTA HAWKS

EASTERN • SOUTHEAST

2025-26 Records: 48-40 SU & 46-42 ATS, 44-44 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

85-1

NBA FINALS

25-1

CONFERENCE

+290

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
99 (#15 OF 30)

Trae Young did some incredible things with the Hawks, posting absurd numbers, running elite offenses, and guiding Atlanta to the Eastern Conference Finals in 2020-21. But after years of persistent questions about his future with the organization, the Hawks ultimately decided to move on. Atlanta traded Young to the Wizards in what amounted to a virtual salary dump on January 9, parting ways with the former face of the franchise.

The Hawks then played extremely well the rest of the season, going 28-15 to earn the sixth seed in the East and post Cleaning The Glass' seventh-best Efficiency Differential at +6.2. They also gave New York a tougher postseason test than anyone else, taking a 2-1 series lead before the Knicks went nuclear the rest of the way.

Heading into 2026-27, Atlanta is hoping a full offseason together will bring this group even closer. The front office also added Oklahoma City wing Luguentz Dort, giving the Hawks another source of perimeter toughness and defensive tenacity.

It'll be interesting to see how it all comes together, but Quin Snyder had his team playing some beautiful basketball down the stretch. He seems to be at his best with a more equal-opportunity offense. With heliocentric "Trae-ball" now a thing of the past, the question is whether Atlanta can build on what it found late last season.

I believe Atlanta is building something real. However, someone in the Eastern Conference has to fall short of expectations. To me, this is a candidate. I won't personally go Under on the win total, but I feel better about it than I do the Over.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

2.2

#12

ADJUSTED NET RATING

115.1

#14

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

113.0

#9

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What does Dort bring to the Hawks?

Atlanta needs to maintain the defensive metrics it posted after the Young trade. The Hawks ranked seventh in the NBA in Efficiency Differential after moving Young to Washington, driven largely by a sixth-place finish in points allowed per 100 possessions (111.5). Dort should help them keep defending at a high level.

Dort made the NBA's All-Defensive First Team in 2024-25 and has finished in at least the 81st percentile leaguewide in Defensive Estimated Plus-Minus in back-to-back seasons. He's wide, extremely strong for a wing, and outrageously physical. He makes life hell for perimeter options and is sturdy enough to guard up against bigger players.

The issue is that Dort can be a bit of a spray-and-pray shooter, so defenses will leave him open in the postseason. But unlike some other shaky shooters, Dort will at least let it fly. The players who really kill you offensively are the ones too scared to launch.

Dort is a natural fit for a team that wins with its ability to guard, and he brings championship experience to the locker room.

Does Atlanta have enough offensively?

Acquiring McCollum from the Wizards was largely about finding a salary match in the Young deal, but the veteran combo guard became Atlanta's primary source of shot creation in the playoffs. The Hawks are hoping Jalen Johnson can become that go-to option moving forward, but will he be ready for that role this year? After averaging 22.5 points, 10.3 rebounds, and 7.9 assists per game last season, you'd have to think he'll eventually find a way to shoulder that kind of load come April.

Even so, Atlanta is light on individual scoring between McCollum, Johnson, and a little Nickeil Alexander-Walker. That's concerning when the game slows down in the playoffs.

The Hawks will be hoping Aaron Wiggins and 2026 first-round pick Kingston Flemings can provide more punch, though that is more likely to come during the regular season.

And in the regular season, Atlanta should be fine. After the All-Star break last year, the Hawks ranked fourth in Net Rating (9.7), tied for 10th in Offensive Rating (118.3), and second in Defensive Rating (108.6). They also shot 40.0% from three.

That's all well and good if you're looking at potentially going Over on the win total. But Atlanta will need to level up offensively when it matters if it wants to make real noise in the East.

Is this a make-or-break year for Dyson Daniels?

Daniels is one of the best perimeter defenders in basketball. He made the NBA's All-Defensive First Team in 2024-25, followed it with an All-Defensive Second Team selection last year, and led the NBA in steals in 2024-25 at 3.0 per game.

The problem is that Daniels' offensive development completely stalled last season. His counting stats were solid — 11.9 points, 6.8 rebounds, and 5.9 assists per game — but he shot just 18.8% from deep, and his confidence completely disappeared. After shooting 34.0% on 3.1 three-point attempts per game in 2024-25, he took only 1.5 per game last season.

If defenses can play 10 feet off Daniels, it will be difficult for the Hawks to justify keeping him on his current contract. Atlanta has plenty of defenders in the rotation, and it's entirely possible the team eventually decides it needs more offensive juice in his spot. As things stand, the Hawks are paying nearly \$48 million to Daniels and Dort, two players who likely won't be able to share the floor in the playoffs.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 43.5

DID YOU KNOW: ATLANTA WAS 19-11 SU
& ATS VS. WESTERN CONFERENCE FOES
LAST SEASON



BOSTON CELTICS

EASTERN • ATLANTIC

2025-26 Records: 59-30 SU & 52-37 ATS, 32-57 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

16-1

NBA FINALS

+600

CONFERENCE

+225

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
101 (#8 OF 30)

It's been a strange couple of months in Boston. After getting bounced by Philadelphia in the opening round of the 2026 postseason, the Celtics went big-game hunting and pursued Giannis Antetokounmpo. That chase fractured the team's relationship with Jaylen Brown. In a sense, the C's chose Jayson Tatum over Brown by keeping the former out of the Antetokounmpo negotiations. Then came the trade.

Boston sent Brown, a former Finals MVP who finished sixth in MVP voting in 2025-26, to Philadelphia for 36-year-old Paul George, two first-round picks (2028 and 2031), and two second-rounders (2028 and 2030).

NBA media and fans absolutely ripped the move, as the package was widely viewed as underwhelming. The deal also sent Brown to a division rival, and it directly resulted in the 76ers adding LeBron James.

Despite all of that, I believe the Celtics are the top team in the East. George slides in as a veteran No. 2 behind Tatum, who should be healthier as he gets further removed from his Achilles tear. George's best days might be behind him, but he's an elite shooter, he still competes on the defensive end, and he's completely okay with taking a backseat to Tatum. That matters on a roster built around Tatum's game.

Boston also made a big addition by signing former Knicks center Mitchell Robinson to a three-year, \$47.4 million deal. He gives them a rim protector and an offensive-rebounding machine. He'll have to compete with Neemias Queta for the starting job, but Brad Stevens now calls the frontcourt a "position of strength."

Then there's Joe Mazzulla, one of the best coaches in basketball, who says the thing he's most excited about is "the unknown." That's classic Mazzulla.

Perhaps Mazzulla will have some new wrinkles to throw at teams, but the reality is that Boston deserves the benefit of the doubt as long as he's coaching a talented roster. And this roster is not only insanely talented, but deep and versatile, too. I love the group to fly Over the win total, and I think the Celtics have a shot at representing the East in the NBA Finals.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

7.6
#4

ADJUSTED NET RATING

119.9
#2

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

112.3
#4

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is Tatum actually 100% healthy?

Tatum didn't shoot the ball incredibly well after returning from his Achilles injury last year, but he averaged 21.8 points, 10.0 rebounds, and 5.3 assists in 32.6 minutes per game. He looked well on his way to returning to an All-NBA level, especially after averaging 23.3 points, 10.7 rebounds, and 6.8 assists against the 76ers while shooting 47.5% from the floor and 36.5% from three.

The issue is that Tatum had to miss Game 7 of that series because of pain in his left knee. The fear with that type of injury is that it could stem from overcompensating while recovering from the Achilles tear. That is the biggest swing factor on Boston's ceiling.

Has Boston sorted all of this out? The Celtics made a bold decision in choosing Tatum over Brown. Tatum has been a better two-way player throughout his career, and he's a little younger. But that decision will age poorly if Tatum's health isn't there.

Will increased responsibility lead to another leap from Pritchard?

After the Brown trade, people scrambled to figure out why the Celtics did what they did. While they did that, I started digging into some numbers. One thing I found was that Pritchard absolutely torched opponents when playing without Brown. Per 75 possessions, he scored 26.7 points while chipping in 7.6 assists and 5.3 rebounds. He looked like a legitimate No. 1 option when given the opportunity to cook.

Pritchard won't have free rein this season, as Tatum is still the alpha in Boston. Still, the Celtics are very likely looking to empower Pritchard a little more, and that should mean another increase in production. He's earned a bigger role. Last year, the highly skilled guard averaged 17.0 points and 5.2 assists in 32.4 minutes per game. Is it crazy to think he'll push that to 20+ points per game? I don't think so.

Are we sure this team is worse than it was last year?

I understand that what went out versus what came in looks rough in the Brown trade, but how about comparing the 2025-26 roster to the 2026-27 roster? Last year, the Celtics cruised to 56 wins despite mostly having Brown and not having Tatum. This year's team swaps in Tatum, a better two-way player, for Brown, and adds George and Robinson. That's more talent in the door, plus a real upgrade at center.

I'm just not sure I see a big dropoff from Boston, which is why the Over is one of my favorite win total plays. I also have some action on the Celtics to win the championship. I believe in this coaching staff and this collection of players. Leaps from guys like Hugo Gonzalez and Jordan Walsh would only make Boston more dangerous.

All in all, I'll be buying whatever shares of the Celtics people are selling.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 50.5

DID YOU KNOW: BOSTON WAS 39-21 UNDER THE TOTAL PLAYING ON ONE DAY REST IN THE 2025-26 SEASON



BROOKLYN NETS

EASTERN • ATLANTIC

2025-26 Records: 20-62 SU & 38-44 ATS, 37-45 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

800-1 NBA FINALS

250-1 CONFERENCE

250-1 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 93 (#27 OF 30)

Jordi Fernandez is such a good coach that Brooklyn has had to trade productive players just to keep him from out-winning the organization's tank. It's a cruel spot for Fernandez to be in, and it mirrors what we've seen with Will Hardy in Utah. However, the training wheels (or tanking wheels) are starting to come off.

Fernandez did an awesome job of rehabilitating Michael Porter Jr. last year. The Nets were compensated to take on the sharpshooting wing's contract, and he averaged 24.2 points, 7.1 rebounds, and 3.0 assists per game on 46.3/36.3/85.9 shooting splits. Fernandez turned him into a positive trade asset, and Brooklyn easily could have flipped him over the summer. Instead, Porter will be on the roster on Opening Night, with Julius Randle, a three-time All-Star and two-time All-NBA performer, next to him.

The Nets picked up a pick for taking on Randle's deal in the trade that sent LaMelo Ball to the Timberwolves, and that's probably the main reason he's in Brooklyn. However, with the new relegation zone in the lottery, the Nets clearly see him helping them avoid the bottom. I happen to think he will, which is why this is an Over team for me when looking at win totals.

I just like the size and toughness that a frontcourt of Porter, Randle, and Day'Ron Sharpe brings to the table. The group should be very good on the glass, especially with a big backcourt.

That backcourt consists of rookie Mikel Brown Jr., the sixth pick in the draft who is electric as a shot creator, and Egor Demin, the eighth pick in 2025 who has a world of potential.

The Nets also have several recent first-round picks to keep developing, including Nolan Traore, Drake Powell, Ben Saraf, and Danny Wolf. On top of that, the front office added solid veterans in Keon Ellis and Terance Mann.

This team is more talented than it has been in a couple of years, and Fernandez won't be asked to finish at the bottom of the standings. Don't be surprised if this is an elite against-the-spread group and a team that far exceeds public expectations.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-9.7

#29

ADJUSTED NET RATING

108.5

#30

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

118.2

#25

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is Demin about to become a household name?

The Nets clearly believe Brown has big-time potential. They took him at No. 6 when they could have gone with other high-upside prospects. But no matter what you think of Brown, it's pretty clear Demin is the most important young player in Brooklyn.

Last year, Demin averaged 10.3 points, 3.3 assists, and 3.2 rebounds per game. His 39.9% field goal percentage was a bit of a mess for a 6-foot-8 player, but he shot 38.5% from deep. His three-ball was considered the one thing keeping him from becoming a special offensive talent, and it now looks like a strength.

With the jumper in good shape, Demin needs to be tougher attacking the rim and better at finishing once he gets there. Well, he packed on quite a bit of muscle this offseason, and he looked like a man among boys at the Vegas Summer League. Expect him to take another step forward in 2026-27, and don't be surprised if he's the best player on this team in a year or two.

Will the Nets trade Porter?

The Nets haven't extended Porter, so he'll play on his \$40.8 million contract in 2026-27. That deal is expiring, and several playoff teams will have interest in adding it to the books. Porter was an absolute assassin last year, going from a pure movement shooter to showcasing some improved on-ball chops. He was clearly a bit underutilized in Denver, which is understandable with Nikola Jokic there. But he's worth every dollar he's making, and he'll have suitors.

I'd like to see Brooklyn extend Porter, because a big-bodied shooter like that will only make life easier on the team's young core. But the Nets could get some very strong trade offers, so they might be inclined to sell if they're not in the Play-In picture come February.

Who else will establish themselves as long-term pieces in Brooklyn?

While the Nets hit on Demin in 2025, they took four other players in the first round: Traore, Powell, Saraf, and Wolf. Are any of them any good?

I'm a huge fan of Traore's game. If any of the non-Demin 2025 picks are going to hit, I feel strongly it'll be him. Traore has unteachable speed and a good-looking stroke, and he has bulked up a ton since the end of last season. He should be a sparkplug off the bench this year, and I wouldn't even be stunned if he unseats Brown should Brooklyn be unhappy with the playmaking in its first unit.

The Nets also added Joshua Jefferson in the 2026 NBA Draft, using the pick acquired in the Randle deal to bring in the former Iowa State forward. Jefferson is a winner and a jack-of-all-trades type, so it isn't hard to imagine him contributing to an improved Brooklyn team.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 23.5

DID YOU KNOW: BROOKLYN WAS 1-13 SU & 2-12 ATS IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON



CHARLOTTE HORNETS

EASTERN • SOUTHEAST

2025-26 Records: 45-39 SU & 50-34 ATS, 33-51 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

250-1

NBA FINALS

50-1

CONFERENCE

+660

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 97 (#19 OF 30)

The Hornets are hoping to build on a strong 2025-26 season. Charlotte could not get out of the Play-In Tournament, but the team went 44-38, played beautiful offensive basketball, and made real strides toward establishing the culture Jeff Peterson and Charles Lee want.

After all of that, the Hornets made more offseason moves than a 12-year-old running a franchise in NBA 2K, most aimed at adding future assets and improving salary-cap flexibility. But this is a very different team after one of those moves sent former franchise player LaMelo Ball to the Timberwolves.

The front office sold Ball after one of the healthiest seasons of his career. The trade brought back Naz Reid, a 2033 unprotected first-round pick, three second-round picks, and three first-round swaps. Charlotte also added another valuable first in the deal that sent Miles Bridges to the Suns for Grayson Allen and Royce O'Neale.

Dennis Schroder, Dorian Finney-Smith, Hannes Steinbach (No. 14), and Christian Anderson Jr. (No. 18) also walked through the door in the offseason. We know what the first two can do, but the rookies will be fun to watch. Analytically, Steinbach was an otherworldly rebounder at Washington. Meanwhile, Anderson is a sniper who can also run the offense.

Charlotte's moves signaled a willingness to step back now in order to take multiple steps forward soon — and I do see the step back coming, leaning Under on the win total. The Hornets are as well positioned as anyone to assemble the assets needed to trade for the next available superstar, but who knows who — or when — that'll be?

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

3.9

#8

ADJUSTED NET RATING

118.1

#6

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

114.2

#14

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How will Charlotte function without LaMelo?

Charlotte put up a league-high 122.4 points per 100 possessions from January 1 through the end of last season. Ball's 20.1 points and 7.1 assists per game played a major role in that, and his 3.8 triples per game on 10.3 attempts helped the Hornets drown opponents in threes.

Without Ball's ability to shoot off the bounce, create for others, and apply rim pressure, this offense will not look the same in 2026-27. The Hornets will lean more on on-ball creation from Kon Knueppel and Brandon Miller, who have clearly been handed the keys. But Charlotte will keep firing from deep, especially with the shooters added this offseason.

Knueppel, who dealt with a minor hamstring injury in camp, averaged 18.5 points per game as a rookie. He is one of the league's most lethal shooters, but there is more to his game than that. Charlotte will try to unlock that by putting him in uncomfortable situations. Miller is a three-level scorer who also competes defensively, and this feels like the season an All-Star leap could be coming.

Coby White will man the point, bringing electric shooting but limited playmaking. In a small sample last season, Charlotte scored 133.8 points per 100 possessions with White, Knueppel, and Miller on the floor without Ball. The Hornets will hope that group stays elite offensively. Schroder should also give them solid minutes at the spot.

Reid cannot be forgotten, either. He is a career 37.1% three-point shooter with an underrated off-the-dribble game, and the floor should be nicely spaced whenever he is out there with Charlotte's core.

The bench should be a major strength. Beyond Schroder, Allen and O'Neale should give the Hornets quality wing minutes. Grant Williams can move the ball and knock down shots, while Ryan Kalkbrenner and Steinbach will spell Moussa Diabate with energy and toughness. We could also see flashes from Sion James, Anderson, and Tidjane Salaun.

Charlotte should be difficult to guard, but it also will not do much defending. Even with Ball in Minnesota, we are talking about a similar makeup. It just might be a little worse.

Will Reid level up now that he's freed from the frontcourt logjam in Minnesota?

Reid is a great pickup even if he remains the player he was in Minnesota, but there is always hope he breaks out after escaping a difficult situation. Well, calling the Timberwolves a "difficult situation" is a bit harsh given their team success. Still, Reid always played behind Karl-Anthony Towns or Julius Randle, never getting a real opportunity to start at the four. He should have that with the Hornets.

Last season, without Randle on the floor, Reid's per-75 numbers rose from 18.4 points and 7.7 rebounds to 19.6 points and 8.2 rebounds. A modest jump, perhaps nothing to write home about. However, Minnesota was a +8.1 with Reid on the floor and Randle off it. That is pretty significant. And prior to Randle's arrival, when Reid played without Towns, he put up 21.4 points and 8.5 rebounds per 75 possessions.

There is a real chance his counting stats improve with the runway to play 30+ minutes without looking over his shoulder. That would make the Ball trade look much better.

Is this a playoff team?

There is enough talent here for Charlotte to remain highly competitive, especially with Lee pulling the strings. Still, this feels like a minor step back from the on-court quality we saw in the second half of 2025-26. Look for the Hornets to be a borderline top-10 team in Adjusted Offensive Rating, but to be held back by a bottom-10 Adjusted Defensive Rating.

The end result could be another Play-In Tournament exit. But the future is bright in Charlotte, and it will be interesting to see when the organization pushes its chips in.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 39.5

DID YOU KNOW: CHARLOTTE WAS 26-16
ATS IN HOME GAMES LAST SEASON



CHICAGO BULLS

EASTERN • CENTRAL

2025-26 Records: 31-51 SU & 38-44 ATS, 37-45 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

800-1

NBA FINALS

200-1

CONFERENCE

85-1

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 93 (#26 OF 30)

Former Bulls executive Arturas Karnisovas was keen on "building from the middle," a model that has worked for other franchises. In Chicago, though, all it did was muddy the waters. The Bulls struggled to decide between pushing for contention and embracing a rebuild, and it ultimately ended with Karnisovas being fired.

Chicago is now embracing its youth, and Bryson Graham is in charge of all of it. The new President of Basketball Operations has said all the right things about valuing the draft, prioritizing player development, and staying conscious of the cap. For the first time in a while, it feels like the Bulls are in good hands.

Expectations this season are extremely reasonable, but that doesn't mean Chicago can't be competitive. New head coach Tiago Splitter did a good job with Portland last season, so he's an exciting presence on the sideline. The Bulls also seem to have struck gold in the draft, selecting an outrageously gifted wing in Caleb Wilson at No. 4. Wilson and Matas Buzelis should give Chicago a great pair of forwards for a very long time.

Josh Giddey is back after a season in which he averaged 17.0 points, 9.1 assists, and 8.3 rebounds per game. He also knocked down a career-high 1.9 triples per game. Giddey is an interesting player, as he hasn't yet proven he can be on the floor late in playoff games. However, he'll be given every opportunity to prove himself as a long-term piece in Chicago.

The Bulls also brought in some intriguing win-now players this summer. They added one of the most coveted free agents on the market in Norman Powell, who averaged 21.7 points per game last season and fills a major need as a floor-spacing option. He's a career 39.6% three-point shooter. Chicago also grabbed a starting big man, swooping in on the Julius Randle trade between the Nets and Wolves to acquire Nic Claxton.

I'm not sure Chicago has the makeup of a playoff team, but this is a formidable group. And for the first time in a long time, there are good vibes surrounding the basketball team in the Windy City.

This is a team I mentioned in the Draft Lottery feature for a reason. It's exactly the type of squad I'd expect to scratch and claw for a few extra wins. So if you're planning to do anything with them before the season, you might want to consider the Over on 28.5. They're going to play with speed, energy, and some youthful exuberance, which can throw opponents off over the course of a long season.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-5.2

#23

ADJUSTED NET RATING

112.3

#25

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

117.5

#22

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is there enough shooting on the roster?

Chicago brought in Powell, who fills a big need at the two. He has been an awesome shooter throughout his career, and his presence should make life a little easier on the rest of the starters. Outside of Powell, however, the shooting is highly questionable.

Giddey may have made 1.9 threes per game last season, but teams are fine playing way off him and living with a couple of makes. Buzelis shot only 34.9% last season. Wilson's jumper looked good in Summer League but was a major question mark coming out of UNC. Claxton is nothing but a rim-runner. There's a real chance this is one of the worst three-point shooting teams in the league, and it's tough to win games when you're at a nightly mathematical disadvantage.

Which version of Claxton is this porous defensive team getting?

Claxton averaged 2.5 blocks per game in 2022-23. That year, he finished in the NBA's 98th percentile in Defensive Estimated Plus-Minus (+2.3) and Block Percentage (6.9%). Since then, his numbers as a rim protector have dropped off significantly, and he finished last season in the 47th percentile in DEPM (-0.3).

Chicago is hoping Claxton can anchor the defense and provide consistent resistance when opponents get two feet in the paint. Does he still have that in him?

He probably deserves another chance to prove himself. It's hard being a defense-first player on a team with zero desire to play winning basketball. Perhaps he'll be rejuvenated in his new situation.

Who is consistently helping off the bench?

I feel like I'm higher than most on the Bulls' chances of winning 29+ games, but the bench is extremely concerning. Outside of Tre Jones, one of the better reserve guards in basketball, Chicago is asking a lot of Isaac Okoro, Patrick Williams, and Jalen Smith. Those aren't exactly players you can trust on a nightly basis.

The Bulls did make late-offseason moves to get Buddy Hield and Jordan Hawkins. That addresses their lack of shooting a bit, but it also potentially adds defensive turnstiles to the rotation.

Dailyn Swain is a player Bulls fans should be very excited about, a 6-foot-7 guard with an intriguing skill set. The issue is that he looks like a player who needs some time to season. Right now, he's a non-shooter, and Chicago can't afford to give minutes to many more of those.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 28.5

DID YOU KNOW: CHICAGO WENT 31-20 UNDER THE TOTAL VS. EASTERN CONFERENCE TEAMS LAST SEASON



CLEVELAND CAVALIERS

EASTERN • CENTRAL

2025-26 Records: 60-40 SU & 40-60 ATS, 52-48 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

23-1

NBA FINALS

+900

CONFERENCE

+125

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
100.5 (#9 OF 30)

The Cavaliers got bounced by the eventual champion Knicks in the Eastern Conference Finals last year. The series felt like it could have gone differently had Cleveland not blown a 22-point lead in the fourth quarter. The Knicks absolutely stomped them the rest of the way, and the lopsided fashion in which it happened had people calling for Kenny Atkinson's job. The front office ultimately kept Atkinson, which might have had something to do with Cleveland analytically winning the series. We'll see if the team regrets that decision, but there are more positives than negatives heading into 2026-27.

Cleveland inked Donovan Mitchell and James Harden to new deals in the summer. Mitchell was locked in for four years, \$273 million, while Harden signed for three years, \$97 million. Those two just might make up the best backcourt in the NBA. They did have some shaky moments in last year's playoffs — and neither one likes playing defense — but a full training camp and preseason to get more comfortable with one another should work wonders.

The Cavaliers also have the frontcourt pairing of Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen back, giving the team two massive bodies who pride themselves on defense. The two bigs also happen to be pretty damn efficient offensively.

The big change is that Cleveland now has an exciting new starter at small forward. For a while, it seemed like it'd be LeBron James, but the Cavaliers pivoted to Peyton Watson once The King signed with the 76ers. Cleveland got Watson in a sign-and-trade with Denver, and he could be the perfect fit. Watson is active defensively, uses his size and athleticism well as an off-ball player, and is improving his three-ball. He also hasn't yet reached his prime, so he can be with this franchise for a long time.

The Cavaliers did sacrifice depth to improve their starting five, but that should pay off. Many people seem to be dismissing this group as an Eastern Conference contender, but they're firmly in the mix. There's also a good chance this team goes Over its win total, as we have seen 50+ wins from Cleveland in three of the last four years. The roster is packed with players who play great ball in the regular season.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

3.7

#9

ADJUSTED NET RATING

118.3

#5

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

114.6

#17

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is there another jump coming from Mobley?

Mobley has talked up his improved ball-handling and ability to create in isolation. If he can do a little more as a scorer, that'd be great for Cleveland's half-court offense. However, just shooting the three-ball better would be lovely. After shooting 37.0% from three in 2024-25, Mobley made only 29.7% of his 3.2 attempts per game in 2025-26. He needs to find his confidence and show up ready to launch in 2026-27.

Mobley continues to be a high-level defender, and it's clear he's very skilled. But this is a question we've been asking for years. It's time he plays more assertively, and it's time he finds some consistency.

Will Watson be the rug that ties the room together?

Watson is coming off a fantastic year with the Nuggets. His 14.6 points, 4.9 rebounds, and 2.1 assists per game were all career highs. He shot 41.1% from three, up from 35.3% in 2024-25. Unfortunately, hamstring injuries kept Watson out of the playoffs. But it sounds like he's healthy heading into 2026-27, and the Cavaliers are going to love having him.

Watson should enjoy playing with Harden and Mitchell, who should set him up for the same quality of looks he got playing off Nikola Jokic. We could also see Watson do a bit more in transition, and don't be surprised if he quickly becomes a favorite of Harden's as a play-finisher.

The 24-year-old should also fit Cleveland defensively. He won't shy away from guarding the opponent's best scorer, and he'll be aggressive in looking to make plays off the ball.

The only thing I can poke at is that Watson appears to be a touch overrated defensively. He's not a negative by any means, but his defensive metrics aren't all that great, and he doesn't profile as a lockdown guy. Still, I love this fit, and it was impressive the front office made this happen without having many assets.

Who steps up off the bench?

Sam Merrill, who averaged 12.8 points per game and shot 42.1% from three last season, will be Cleveland's most reliable reserve. He's as dangerous as it gets as an off-ball weapon. Jaylon Tyson should also give the Cavaliers good minutes after popping a bit as a sophomore last year. Cleveland will need contributions from unexpected places in 2026-27.

One of the best bets to crack the rotation is Mario Hezonja. The 31-year-old was the fifth pick in the 2015 NBA Draft, but he had an up-and-down career before heading overseas after the 2019-20 season. But Hezonja is a 6-foot-9 wing with a good jumper and some real athleticism. Bringing him in was a sharp move from the front office, especially with the way Hezonja has performed the last few years.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 47.5

DID YOU KNOW: CLEVELAND WENT 41-29 SU BUT 27-43 ATS VS. THE EAST LAST SEASON



DALLAS MAVERICKS

WESTERN • SOUTHWEST
2025-26 Records: 26-56 SU & 37-45 ATS, 37-45 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

175-1

NBA FINALS

85-1

CONFERENCE

85-1

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
95 (#24 OF 30)

Cooper Flagg hit the ground running in Dallas, bringing hope to all who rep MFFL in their Twitter bios. Despite that, the Mavericks were far from successful. Dallas finished with just 26 victories and 11 games out of a Play-In spot. That led to wholesale changes in the offseason.

The front office was turned over to former Toronto Raptors executive Masai Ujiri. After just two weeks on the job, Ujiri relieved Jason Kidd of his duties as head coach and made a massive splash by hiring Michigan head coach Dusty May for the job. Ujiri made the transition as comfortable as possible for May by selecting Morez Johnson Jr. with the ninth overall pick.

Dallas enters the 2026-27 season with a franchise cornerstone, an executive with a track record of success, and a big name as its head coach. Whether it all comes together remains to be seen, but there is reason for optimism.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-4.9

#22

ADJUSTED NET RATING

110.4

#28

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

115.3

#18

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How impactful can a healthy Kyrie Irving be?

Dallas desperately needs Irving to return to peak form, and as he enters training camp, he has no physical restrictions from the torn ACL he suffered 19 months ago. That is a blessing for a team that has real questions at guard. Last season, Brandon Williams — now with Golden State — led all Mavericks guards in scoring (13.0 PPG), and Ryan Nembhard — now with Denver — led the team in assists (5.3 APG). As it stands right now, the Mavericks' backcourt rotation will consist of Irving, Max Christie, Marcus Sasser, and Zaccharie Risacher. That is not a lot of ball-handling and shot creation. Irving is an elite point guard who has ranked in the 85th percentile or higher in Turnover Rate and the 83rd percentile or higher in points per 100 shot attempts in his time with the Mavericks. Still, he will have a massive load on his shoulders, and for a 34-year-old guard coming off a serious knee injury, that is a big ask.

What does Cooper Flagg's sophomore season bring?

Flagg was tremendous in his rookie season. The forward averaged 21.0 points, 6.7 rebounds, 4.5 assists, and 2.1 steals and blocks in 70 games. Despite that, his impact was not felt in the advanced metrics. Flagg improved his team's net rating by just 1.2 points per 100 possessions on the floor. For a 6-foot-9 forward, he was also somewhat muted on the glass. Flagg finished in the 98th percentile in defensive rebounding rate (14.1%), but he averaged just 1.2 offensive rebounds per game and finished in the 79th percentile in offensive rebounding rate (3.5%). Dusty May has told the media he would love to see more second-chance opportunities for Flagg, and perhaps Irving's return allows him to play more minutes lower on the floor. The second-year phenom will need to improve his shooting as well. In his lone season at Duke, Flagg shot 38.5% on 3.6 attempts per game. Last season, he hit just 29.5% of his 3.5 attempts per game.

How will May do at the professional level?

May is a winner. In his final four seasons in college basketball — two at Florida Atlantic and two at Michigan — May went 124-26, made the Final Four twice, and won a national championship. His Michigan teams were fast-paced, analytically sound, and emphasized ball movement. The Wolverines finished last season 25th in assist rate (61.0%), took 41.4% of their attempts from deep, and their average two-point attempt distance was 4.8 feet. How does all of this translate to the professional level? There is not a rich history of coaches who have made the leap from college to the NBA successfully. May has proven to be a basketball Midas, turning every program he touches into gold. Just three seasons ago, Dallas lost in the NBA Finals, but that was a lifetime ago. A .500 record and a Play-In berth would be considered a massive success, but May will have to figure out how to get the most out of a flawed roster to do so.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 35.5

DID YOU KNOW: DALLAS WAS 12-4 UNDER THE TOTAL VS. DIVISIONAL OPPONENTS LAST SEASON



DENVER NUGGETS

WESTERN • NORTHWEST
2025-26 Records: 56-32 SU & 46-42 ATS, 53-35 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

23-1 NBA FINALS

13-1 CONFERENCE

+880 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 101 (#5 OF 30)

It is somewhat frustrating to watch how Denver has operated since winning the NBA Finals in 2023. Yes, there is some sense in keeping the core of a championship team together, but the front office has failed time and again to inject that group with the requisite talent to keep up with the ever-evolving Western Conference.

To make matters worse, the front office decided to forgo paying Peyton Watson for financial reasons — the Nuggets are the only team in the second apron — and instead shipped him off for pennies on the dollar. Denver enters the season with three of its top eight scorers from last season gone and three core pieces — Nikola Jokic, Aaron Gordon, and Cameron Johnson — in their 30s.

David Adelman has said he wants a rotation of 10 men for the regular season, but this is hardly a roster that is deep with talent. Can the Nuggets make it through the regular season with a paper-thin roster once more? What does that even mean in a Western Conference that is as young and deep as this one?

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

4.9
#7

ADJUSTED NET RATING

121.3
#1

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

116.4
#21

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What does Denver get out of its shooting guard spot?

The two-guard spot for Denver is a huge mystery heading into the 2026-27 season. Christian Braun is coming off an extremely poor shooting season in which he hit 29.6% of his three-point attempts. The former Kansas star did average 12.0 points and 4.8 rebounds on 51.9% shooting from the floor, but he was a complete non-factor in the series loss to Minnesota and completely lost his confidence on offense as the season went along. DeMar DeRozan averaged 18.4 points on 49.7% shooting last season, but he is also a non-factor when it comes to shooting and will tighten the spacing for Denver when he is on the floor. Julian Strawther remains on the roster, but he failed to deliver last season when expectations were high. The position is not a massive weakness by any stretch. However, in a Western Conference that is as good as it has ever been, a position group built like this could be the difference in a playoff series.

Can this roster handle the attrition of an 82-game season?

It is status quo for the core of Denver's roster once again this season. While there are worse cores to maintain, there is the question of how a top-heavy roster will deal with the expected attrition of a long and arduous schedule. Aaron Gordon has played in just 85 regular-season games over the last two seasons. Cameron Johnson has not played more than 60 games in a season since 2021-22. Jamal Murray played in 75 games last season, but it was the most in a single season for him since the 2018-19 campaign. The presence of DeRozan on this roster gives the Nuggets a steady presence in case attrition hits. The Nuggets stunned win-total bettors last season with a 12-game winning streak to end the season, surpass their win total by a half-win, and steal the third seed. But they needed a 12-game winning streak to achieve that. Can they survive a long season once again?

How in the world does Jokic follow up that season?

The Joker has set otherworldly standards for himself with his play, but last season was downright incredible. Jokic averaged 27.7 points, 12.9 rebounds, and a career-high 10.7 assists per game on 56.9% shooting. In advanced metrics, he set career highs in usage rate (32.5%), assist rate (45.8%), and assist-to-usage rate (1.41). However, it is worth noting that he also played in the fewest games of his career. Most of the games he lost to injury last season were due to a knee injury suffered when Spencer Jones accidentally stepped on his foot and caused him to hyperextend his knee. Still, Jokic is 31 and entering his 12th season. His availability has been one of his greatest strengths, but it wouldn't be a shock to see fewer than 70 games played become the norm for "Big Honey."

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 49.5

DID YOU KNOW: DENVER POSTED A 29-15 OVER THE TOTAL RECORD ON THE ROAD LAST SEASON



DETROIT PISTONS

EASTERN • CENTRAL

2025-26 Records: 67-29 SU & 50-46 ATS, 46-50 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

40-1

NBA FINALS

11-1

CONFERENCE

+150

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 101 (#6 OF 30)

The Pistons had such a strong 2025-26 season. They finished atop the Eastern Conference standings at 60-22 thanks to All-NBA seasons from Cade Cunningham and Jalen Duren. And while the postseason ended a bit earlier than they would have hoped, there was nothing but excitement surrounding the franchise heading into the offseason. How quickly things can change.

Duren had a miserable postseason, averaging just 10.2 points and 8.5 rebounds per game and disappearing in key spots throughout both series. That must have made the Pistons feel they could play hardball while negotiating his new contract, but the situation got messy. The two sides didn't reach a deal until just before Duren's qualifying-offer deadline kicked in. Along the way, they barely talked, and Detroit tried to put a weight clause in his contract. That was wildly insulting to a player who has been built like a Marvel superhero since entering the league.

Duren did return to the Pistons on a five-year, \$200 million fully guaranteed deal, but there will surely be some hard feelings. It'll be interesting to see how that affects the vibes in what was a great locker room last year.

Detroit also swapped Tobias Harris for John Collins at power forward. Collins is a good player, but Harris averaged 18.1 points per game in the playoffs. He was the second option for the Pistons and a good veteran presence.

The Pistons did add Isaiah Joe, an absolute sniper with the Thunder. I also liked the Taurean Prince pickup, and they drafted a shifty guard in Ebuka Okorie with the 17th pick in the 2026 NBA Draft.

Detroit should be back in the playoff mix, but teams likely learned how to game plan for them. The Pistons will enter the year as a major regression candidate, and it'll be interesting to see if they have enough scoring to last in the now-loaded Eastern Conference. I know they won 60 games last year, but I'm expecting them to go Under their total in 2026-27.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

7.6
#3

ADJUSTED NET RATING

117.1
#9

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

109.5
#2

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How will Duren respond to a poor postseason and nasty contract dispute?

Every player is different, but we have seen contract stalemates ruin player-team relationships. Even with a new deal inked, there's no guarantee Duren is thrilled with how things went. Hopefully, being surrounded by his teammates and coaches will get him right mentally, as he's a huge part of Detroit's present and future.

Duren also needs to make an impact in the playoffs. He was an absolute beast during the regular season, but he was borderline unplayable against the Magic and Cavaliers. Detroit had an Efficiency Differential of +12.2 with Duren on the floor in the regular season. That dropped to -0.4 in the playoffs.

He needs to keep working on his lateral quickness and defensive positioning, as he wasn't up to the task of defending the back line in the postseason. He also has to expand his offensive game a little, as being a play-finisher wasn't enough when the games mattered most.

Does this team have enough firepower?

The Pistons ran through the 2025-26 regular season, winning 73.2% of their games, but people never quite believed in them as a true Eastern Conference contender. The Pistons never felt like they were there offensively, ranking ninth in the league in Adjusted Offensive Rating (117.1) and 16th in points per 100 plays in a half-court setting (97.6). Detroit simply didn't have enough shot-making around Cunningham.

Adding Joe was a good piece of business by the front office. He averaged 11.1 points per game and shot 42.3% on 6.0 three-point attempts per game. He's an absolute gunner who will make it hard for opponents to send extra attention at Cunningham.

I also love Collins as a player who can knock down the occasional corner three while providing a nice vertical threat, catching lobbs and hammering them down.

Still, I really don't think Detroit has taken the project of building this roster seriously. Adding a shooter is nice, but the Pistons are still insanely low on on-ball creation. Unless Okorie is way readier than we think, or Ausar Thompson unexpectedly has a bag, this should be an easy team to plan for in the half court.

Is this still a top-tier team in the Eastern Conference?

The answer should unequivocally be "Yes." This was the No. 1 seed in the East last year, the young nucleus should keep getting stronger, and a taste of the postseason gives the whole group a better idea of what it takes to win. However, with so many good teams in the East, the Pistons couldn't afford to take a step back in depth-chart talent. Sadly, that's exactly what they did.

Detroit will likely miss Harris more than people think, and teams will look to make Duren uncomfortable the same way others did in the postseason. That means the Pistons could very well struggle to keep up with the East's newer contenders, and one minor injury to a core player could mean an ugly stretch of regular-season play. I have a feeling this will be a team fighting to avoid the Play-In.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 49.5

DID YOU KNOW: DETROIT WENT 12-2 SU, 8-6 ATS & 10-4 OVER THE TOTAL IN THE SECOND OF B2B GAMES LY



GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

WESTERN • PACIFIC

2025-26 Records: 38-46 SU & 36-48 ATS, 49-35 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

50-1

NBA FINALS

28-1

CONFERENCE

+330

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
97.5 (#17 OF 30)

Golden State is the basketball equivalent of that old dog slowly digging in the sand despite its hind legs not working. It might be nice to see the old-timer doing his best, but in the end we all know he won't achieve what he wants to achieve.

The Warriors' front office has been desperately trying to hold on to its core of Draymond Green and Stephen Curry, but almost nothing has panned out for this franchise. The team has missed the postseason in two of the last three seasons, and in the two seasons since the last title in which they have made the playoffs, the Warriors have been hard-capped in the conference semifinals.

This season, there are no real changes. Steve Kerr is back, so too is Green, and the front office is hoping Curry can find some magic in an aging body to bring them back to contention.

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Honestly, what's the point?

It's a sad question, but it's a valid one. Golden State was allegedly in the mix for LeBron James and Giannis Antetokounmpo in the offseason. Instead, James elected to go to Philadelphia, and the Heat landed Antetokounmpo. The big offseason acquisition for the Warriors was Yaxel Lendeborg, who the team selected 11th overall. They did not even add any non-rookies until the final week of August, when they signed guard Brandon Williams. Golden State is essentially running back a 37-win team. Jimmy Butler will not be back from his ACL injury until early 2027, and it was recently reported that Kristaps Porzingis did not make it to the Warriors' training camp in Hawaii due to "an unspecified health issue." The team also retained Al Horford, Gary Payton II, and De'Anthony Melton. It's an ancient group of veterans with an extremely firm ceiling that is nowhere near a championship.

What will this new offense look like?

Golden State is trying despite its sad roster. One of the big changes for the team is a new offensive system being implemented by Kerr, who signed a two-year contract extension in the offseason. The Warriors are allegedly stressing a five-out approach to their offense this season. While the personnel is flawed, it does fit that archetype. Horford and Porzingis are floor-spacing bigs who have made 37.6% and 36.4% of their three-point attempts in their careers, respectively. Lendeborg fits the mold for this offense as well. At 6-foot-9, he provides size, and he shot 37.2% on 180 three-point attempts for Michigan last season. One wonders how Butler and Green fit in such an offensive system, considering neither is a real shooting threat, but the rest of the depth chart is packed with shooters and ball-handlers who could run a five-out type of offense. The Warriors have finished 19th and 17th in offensive efficiency the last two seasons. In the minutes without Curry, they ranked in the 28th percentile in offense. This new system needs to work, or else it will be more of the same this season.

Can Curry stay on the floor and continue to carry this team?

Curry continues to perform at the highest level when he is available for Golden State, but that availability is a concern heading into this season. Curry played in just 43 games last year due to a knee injury that plagued him throughout the campaign. Reports from the team have indicated the knee continues to "linger" for Curry despite his own profession that the knee is healthy. Golden State went 13-26 SU/14-25 ATS in contests without him on the floor. They were outscored by 3.3 points per 100 possessions in the minutes he was on the bench. When he was active and on the floor, the Warriors averaged 119.1 points per 100 possessions and went 24-19 SU/21-22 ATS. The Baby-Faced Assassin is obviously vital to any success Golden State will have, but he is 38 years old and still managing a knee injury. It is hard to believe he'll be able to give the Warriors 70 games like he believes he can.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-0.2

#19

ADJUSTED NET RATING

114.1

#19

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

114.3

#15

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

UNDER 39.5

DID YOU KNOW: GOLDEN STATE POSTED AN 18-30 ATS RECORD ON ONE DAY REST IN THE 2025-26 SEASON



HOUSTON ROCKETS

WESTERN • SOUTHWEST

2025-26 Records: 54-34 SU & 38-50 ATS, 41-47 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

40-1 NBA FINALS

17-1 CONFERENCE

+720 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 100 (#11 OF 30)

The first season of the Kevin Durant era ended in embarrassment for Houston. The Rockets fell to the short-handed Lakers in the first round of the postseason, and questions erupted about the stability of the team under Ime Udoka's leadership.

Despite the poor ending, general manager Rafael Stone stayed the course. He added Marcus Smart and Bogdan Bogdanovic in the offseason, with the hopes that those additions — along with a healthy Fred VanVleet and Steven Adams — would be enough to turn the tide. Houston has a fascinating mix of young and old talent on this roster. If it hits, this could be a very dangerous team in the Western Conference.

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What does the presence of VanVleet and Adams do for this offense?

Houston's biggest problem last season was its offense. The Rockets averaged just 96.8 points per 100 halfcourt possessions. It was heavily reliant on forcing turnovers and converting those into transition opportunities, as well as offensive rebounding and second-chance points. In fact, the Rockets averaged the sixth-most points per 100 plays in transition off steals (142.3) and led the league in putback points per 100 missed shot attempts (29.1). Those can still be strengths of this team, but having a true point guard like VanVleet will work wonders for this offense. Houston had to trust Durant to run its offense at times in clutch games, specifically in the postseason, and that failed spectacularly. With VanVleet, this team has a ball-handler who can take those responsibilities from Durant while providing facilitation and shooting. The addition of Smart gives them another defensive-oriented ball-handler as well. Meanwhile, Adams is an elite offensive rebounder who has finished in the 99th percentile or higher in offensive rebounding rate in each of the last four seasons. He can only improve what is already a strength of this team.

Are the children Houston's future?

In the first week of September, the Rockets inked Amen Thompson to a five-year, \$208 million extension. On the surface, the deal makes total sense. Thompson led the NBA in minutes played, and he averaged career highs in points (18.3), assists (5.3), and steals (1.5). Now that he has made his money, can he take another step forward in his development? Thompson saw his efficiency dip despite the jump in scoring, as he posted a career-low 54.9% effective field goal percentage. He is also a sub-30% three-point shooter. Can he make any strides in that category? That is not needed for the other youngster: Reed Sheppard. Sheppard averaged 13.5 points, 2.9 rebounds, and 3.4 assists in 82 games last season. His shooting stroke was apparent — he shot 39.4% from deep — but he often found himself drawing the ire of Udoka due to his limitations on defense. When he was on the floor, the Rockets allowed 1.7 more points per 100 possessions. Still, his ability to shoot and his role off the bench are vital for Houston, and he is a true candidate to win Sixth Man of the Year.

Will Houston survive another season with Udoka and Durant?

It's a question that cannot be answered with data, but it is one that should be asked. Udoka is an ornery head coach who often likes to take a hard-nosed approach with his players. Players like Sheppard often found their roles changed and minutes restricted at the drop of a hat if Udoka felt they were not performing to task. Despite this, Udoka did often find himself out-coached, with no better example of that than the playoff loss to JJ Redick and the Lakers last season. Then, there is Durant. The Slim Reaper is a mercurial dude whose demeanor has tanked better teams than this. In fact, reports from last season surfaced that a Twitter account linked to Durant that often criticized his teammates was an actual distraction in the locker room. There is no question the All-Star forward, who averaged 26 points, 5.5 rebounds, and 4.8 assists on 52.0% shooting, is an incredible talent. But he and Udoka are an odd mix that could derail the season with their personalities alone.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

5.0
#6

ADJUSTED NET RATING

117.4
#8

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

112.4
#5

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 46.5

DID YOU KNOW: HOUSTON WAS JUST 22-36
ATS VS. FELLOW WESTERN CONFERENCE
FOES LAST SEASON



INDIANA PACERS

EASTERN • CENTRAL

2025-26 Records: 19-63 SU & 40-42 ATS, 41-41 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

50-1

NBA FINALS

18-1

CONFERENCE

+320

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99 (#14 OF 30)

The Pacers were brought up among last year's tankers, including in my Draft Lottery Reform feature earlier in this guide, but their season was always going to be ugly. Tyrese Haliburton missed the entire year after tearing his Achilles in Game 7 of the 2025 NBA Finals, and I'm not sure there's a superstar in the league as important to a team's style of play.

Now Indiana is in good shape again. At Pacers Media Day, Haliburton said he's "100%" with "no restrictions." Rick Carlisle did say they'll be somewhat cautious with the guard, but he also noted he's not expecting Haliburton to be limited physically.

With Haliburton back, Indiana pretty much has the entire gang together again. Andrew Nembhard, Aaron Nesmith, and Pascal Siakam, as well as several key reserves from two years ago, will run with Haliburton. However, Indiana now has a borderline elite center in Ivica Zubac manning the paint. That will give the Pacers a different look than we saw throughout that magical postseason, but it should be beneficial. The slower tempo required to get Zubac situated around the rim should also help as Haliburton gets comfortable on the court.

Indiana also picked up Kelly Oubre Jr. on a two-year, \$16.5 million deal. Oubre brings length, athleticism, and controlled chaos, which should help the Pacers absorb the loss of Benedict Mathurin. Indiana moved Mathurin to Los Angeles in the deal that brought in Zubac, though the guard is now with New Orleans.

This should be a fascinating team to monitor this season. Two years ago, they were playing better basketball than anyone in the playoffs. Can they find that connectivity again?

I tend to think Indiana will find its groove. This team has the talent required to do special things in June, and the Pacers have the depth required to win games at a high clip during the regular season. So, their regular-season Over of 43.5 looks crazy low, and there's some value here with Indiana to win the division, conference, and title.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-7.4

#26

ADJUSTED NET RATING

110.4

#27

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

117.8

#24

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Will Haliburton hit the ground running?

We have seen players return from torn ACLs with zero problems, but Achilles injuries are more serious. Still, recent history suggests Haliburton should be alright. Guys like Kevin Durant, Jayson Tatum, and Dejounte Murray all looked great upon returning. The ones who take a little extra time to return to game action look even better. Durant is the example of that, and Haliburton had a longer recovery timeline than most. On Pacers Opening Night, it will have been 486 days since Haliburton last played a game.

Everything we've seen also suggests he's in great shape. We've seen videos of him throwing down some impressive dunks in empty gyms, and the footage from training camp was extremely promising.

I'd expect Haliburton's turnovers to be up a little early in the season, as it could be tough for him to adjust to the speed of the game. He could also be a little fatigued late in games. However, a couple of weeks in, I imagine Haliburton will look like his usual self. Let's just hope he doesn't deal with pain in other parts of his body due to overcompensation. That bothered Tatum last year.

What will Zubac look like with the full core of the 2024-25 team?

Myles Turner's ability to knock down jumpers was huge for Indiana's spacing. However, Turner was rapidly declining as a rim protector. After finishing with a Defensive Estimated Plus-Minus of +2.0 in 2023-24, Turner's number dropped to +0.5 in 2024-25. Teams also went at him relentlessly throughout the Pacers' postseason run, which is why the front office was alright with him signing with the Bucks.

Indiana did know, however, that an upgrade at center was necessary, which is why the team gave up a ton of assets for Zubac. The Croatian doesn't offer any floor-spacing ability, so Haliburton will have to adjust to that. But he's a true defensive anchor, capable of masking some holes in the Pacers' rotation. He's also a very good play-finisher, an elite offensive rebounder, and a better playmaker than people think.

Zubac is going to make this a much tougher basketball team, and the force he plays with will be big in the playoffs. Zubac would be a problem for the Knicks in a potential playoff series. That has to excite Indiana, which is surely hoping for another dance with its Eastern Conference rival.

Why isn't this team getting love as a true contender?

Unless you're extremely skeptical of Haliburton's health, how can you not like what you see here? This group is a little older than it was two years ago, but none of the pieces are significantly worse. The Pacers have good individual scorers, reliable catch-and-shoot options, and hard-nosed players in the rotation. Carlisle also happens to be one of the best coaches in basketball.

Winning 44 regular-season games shouldn't be an issue for this squad. And if Haliburton, Siakam, and Zubac are healthy in the postseason, Indiana will rightfully feel good about beating anyone.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 43.5

DID YOU KNOW: INDIANA HAD AN UGLY
8-33 SU & 16-25 ATS RECORD ON THE ROAD
LAST SEASON



LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

WESTERN • PACIFIC

2025-26 Records: 42-41 SU & 42-41 ATS, 42-41 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

800-1 NBA FINALS

150-1 CONFERENCE

18-1 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
94.5 (#25 OF 30)

The Kawhi Leonard experiment in Los Angeles finally came to an end this offseason. After an investigation into the franchise and its underhanded ways of paying Leonard through a now-defunct company, the Clippers decided to trade Leonard away. In his wake are a handful of players and draft picks that will do little toward making this team a contender in the 2026-27 season.

Los Angeles is now in rebuild mode. Leonard, James Harden, and Ivica Zubac are all gone. Darius Garland and Keaton Wagler are the franchise cornerstones, for now. The Clippers don't have much talent, and injuries are already starting to take their toll on the roster before it plays a minute.

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What does a full season with Garland at the helm look like?

Garland appeared in 19 games for Los Angeles last season, and he was his usual self. The former Cavaliers guard averaged 19.9 points and 6.4 assists on 47.1% shooting from the floor. He improved the Clippers' net rating by 9.9 points per 100 possessions on the floor. Various toe and foot injuries have limited Garland over the last couple of seasons, but he enters the 2026-27 season healthy and ready to lead this offense. Garland can be an effective point guard when given the opportunity. He ranked in the 63rd percentile in assist rate in his short stint as a Clipper, and he saw his points per 100 shot attempts improve to 117.7 after the trade. Up to this point, his career high in usage rate is 31.3% from his third season in the league, and that rate is right in line with his usage with the Clippers to end last season. Los Angeles likely won't be one of the best offenses in the league, but Garland can put himself in position to have a big year now that he is fully in control of an offense once again.

Will health be any better for this version of the Clippers?

Absolutely not. In fact, injuries are already plaguing this team. During media days, it was announced that Brandon Ingram — one of the pieces in the trade of Leonard — had suffered a partially torn Achilles and that he would miss the start of the season. Bradley Beal will also likely miss time with an inflamed knee, just after a season in which he missed all but six games due to a hip injury. Center Yanic Konan Niederhauser is still recovering from an offseason procedure in his foot, and the newly acquired Max Strus suffered a partial tear of his plantar fascia in the Clippers' first preseason game against the Golden State Warriors. Los Angeles still has bodies. Grady Dick — another piece of the Leonard trade — is on the roster, and Kris Dunn, Brook Lopez, and Derrick Jones Jr. are all back as well. But injuries are already impacting this roster construction, and the depth does not look promising for the Clippers.

Can Wagler give Los Angeles any hope?

It has been a long time since Los Angeles has had a young lottery pick to build around. Wagler — selected fifth overall in the 2026 Draft — is the only hope the Clippers have for the future, but early returns have been varied. In the Las Vegas Summer League, Wagler averaged 18 points, 3.2 rebounds, and 2.8 assists, but he did so on 38.6% shooting from the floor and 33.3% shooting from distance. Wagler isn't exactly an explosive athlete, and there are concerns about his frame. None of that matters, though, as he is likely going to be tried by fire this season. Given the massive amount of injuries already plaguing this roster, coupled with Wagler's draft status, he is in line for a massive workload as a rookie. He is 30-1 to win Rookie of the Year in a loaded draft class. There will likely be some growing pains for Wagler, and it's difficult to project what he will be in both the long and short term.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

1.0

#16

ADJUSTED NET RATING

116.5

#11

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

115.5

#19

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 30.5

DID YOU KNOW: LA CLIPPERS WERE 10-3
OVER THE TOTAL PLAYING ON TWO DAYS
REST LAST SEASON



LOS ANGELES LAKERS

WESTERN • PACIFIC

2025-26 Records: 57-35 SU & 50-42 ATS, 46-46 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

40-1

NBA FINALS

17-1

CONFERENCE

-135

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING

100.5 (#10 OF 30)

It was an offseason of change for the other Los Angeles franchise as well. LeBron James shipped off for Philadelphia, the franchise was sold once again, and the roster was completely overhauled in an attempt to build a team that fit around Luka Doncic.

The Lakers added seven non-rookies in the hopes of constructing a more cohesive unit around the ball-dominant Doncic. The front office also retained Austin Reaves, while letting the likes of Deandre Ayton, Marcus Smart, Rui Hachimura, Luke Kennard, and Jaxson Hayes walk. Change does not guarantee improvement, though, and that is the dominant question for Los Angeles this season.

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is Walker Kessler everything he's said to be?

One of the shiny, new toys for Doncic — arguably the biggest and the shiniest — is Kessler. Los Angeles shipped off unprotected first-round picks in 2031 and 2033, as well as first-round swaps in 2028 and 2030. In theory, Kessler is a rim-protecting shot-blocker who is perfect as a backstop for a defense that will have subpar perimeter defenders in Doncic and Reaves at the point of attack. In his first three seasons, Kessler ranked in the 95th percentile or higher in block rate and the 73rd percentile or higher in foul rate. However, Kessler has not exactly been available over the last two seasons. In total, he played just 63 games over the last two seasons for Utah. And while he can be an effective player, he is not exactly the perfect lob threat at the position that usually thrives with Doncic running the point.

How elite can the pairing of Reaves and Doncic be?

To say Reaves and Doncic worked well together is an understatement. When those two shared the floor, the Lakers' offense was elite. Los Angeles averaged 120.3 points per 100 possessions in those minutes and posted a +9.1 net rating. The team ranked in the 96th percentile in halfcourt offensive efficiency in those possessions. Together, they are an incredible offensive pairing, and they will be a threat against any defense. Where the team will need to improve is in the minutes in which Reaves was alone. In the possessions with Reaves on the floor and Doncic off the floor, the net rating plummeted to -1.5 per 100 possessions. The offensive rating of 116.1 was good for just the 57th percentile. A team without Doncic on the floor getting worse isn't breaking news, but those are below-average returns. Reaves will need to show he can get this team to play at a higher level when Doncic either misses time or is just getting a breather.

Will this team be any good on defense?

Schematically, there is no question the Lakers will be fine on defense. JJ Redick has proven to be a very strong gameplanner, and every night the team will have a plan for whichever opponent lines up across from them. But do they have the talent to execute? Both Reaves and Doncic are subpar defenders at the positions they play. The projected depth chart has Quentin Grimes and Jake LaRavia slotted in as starters. Who in the world is taking on the toughest defensive perimeter assignment among those four and winning defensive possessions more often than not? We saw the Jazz of a few seasons ago put all the pressure on Rudy Gobert to be that team's lone defensive presence, and it did not work well in the postseason — just ask Doncic. Kessler is no Gobert, at least not yet. What this team's ceiling on defense is will ultimately determine how far they get.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

1.4

#14

ADJUSTED NET RATING

117.1

#10

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

115.7

#20

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

OVER 45.5

DID YOU KNOW: LA LAKERS POSTED IMPRESSIVE 30-16 SU & 27-19 ATS RECORD AT HOME LAST SEASON



MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

WESTERN • SOUTHWEST

2025-26 Records: 25-57 SU & 37-45 ATS, 43-39 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

800-1

NBA FINALS

250-1

CONFERENCE

300-1

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING

95.2 (#23 OF 30)

It is an exciting time for Memphis. The front office decided to hit the reset button. Gone are Jaren Jackson Jr. and Ja Morant, the former franchise cornerstones. In their place is a roster that is now one of the youngest in the NBA.

The biggest name for the Grizzlies will be third-overall pick Cameron Boozer, but Zach Edey is entering his third season and Cedric Coward, his second. The Grizzlies still have some solid veterans on the roster as well. Jerami Grant and Isaiah Stewart will serve key roles for the team as some of the youngsters come along. It's clear that head coach Tuomas Iisalo is fully in control with a fledgling roster in which he can fully implement his style.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-5.7

#24

ADJUSTED NET RATING

112.6

#23

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

118.3

#26

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How good is Boozer going to be for Memphis?

Boozer is the favorite to win Rookie of the Year at DraftKings (+300). The race is expected to be tight, as Darryn Peterson (+330), Caleb Wilson (+350), and AJ Dybantsa (+425) are not far off on the oddsboard. But Boozer is deserving of his status as favorite. In six appearances in the NBA Summer League, the former Blue Devil averaged 18.5 points, 8 rebounds, 3.7 assists, and 2.1 steals and blocks on 45.2% shooting from the field. He showed versatility in his game, at times running the offense for Memphis in a point-forward type role. Not only does he have the skill set to make him a stat-sheet stuffer, but he will have the opportunity. Memphis is extremely young, and the goal is clearly development. Boozer will not only have the green light from a scoring perspective, but he will surely get opportunities to run the offense from the perimeter. The Grizzlies won't win many games this season, but Boozer will be in line to win many awards, and Rookie of the Year could be one of them.

Will the youth carry the Grizzlies to a surprising season?

Memphis' win total is just 28.5 at DraftKings, but it would not be stunning to see the Grizzlies show more spunk than what the market expects. Coward was phenomenal in his rookie season. He averaged 13.6 points and 5.9 rebounds on 47.1% shooting. He improved Memphis' net rating by 12.1 points per 100 possessions on the floor, and he showed some versatility with a 15.4% assist rate, good for the 73rd percentile at his position. Edey, when healthy, was a massively impactful piece. In just 283 minutes last season, his efficiency differential of +27.8 ranked in the 100th percentile. Specifically on defense, Edey was a force. In his time on the floor, opponents saw their effective field goal percentage drop by 9.4%. These two are the other key building blocks for this youth movement in Memphis. If they continue on their statistical trajectory, we could be talking about a surprising push for a play-in berth from the young Grizzlies.

What will this team look like now that Iisalo has everything he needs?

Iisalo is in a great position of power. Morant caused friction with his rebuking of Iisalo's structure for minutes and rotations. Now that he is gone, it is a massive vote of confidence for Iisalo and his system. Last season, the Grizzlies were a quick team. They posted the ninth-lowest rate of halfcourt possessions (78.0%) and were fifth in transition frequency (16.5%). Where Memphis lived was in transition off live rebounds. It posted the fourth-highest frequency rate of transition possessions off live rebounds (32.8%). While the Grizzlies were not overly effective in those possessions — they averaged 110.8 points per 100 plays off live rebounds, the fourth-lowest mark in the league — it was clear they wanted to play with pace. This team should continue to play in that fashion. Boozer is an extremely athletic big who can run the floor. Coward, Ty Jerome, Taylor Hendricks, and the rest of this roster fit that style perfectly. Memphis should be a fast-paced, exciting team that really steers into this youth on its roster under Iisalo.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

OVER 28.5

DID YOU KNOW: MEMPHIS HAS BRUTAL
6-24 SU & 9-21 ATS RECORD VS. THE EAST
LAST SEASON



MIAMI HEAT

EASTERN • SOUTHEAST

2025-26 Records: 43-40 SU & 47-36 ATS, 48-35 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

33-1

NBA FINALS

+850

CONFERENCE

+135

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99 (#13 OF 30)

For years, people have been on Pat Riley's case about his inability to cross the goal line when it came to acquiring stars. Well, the 81-year-old finally landed a big fish, making the biggest splash of the offseason.

Riley sent Tyler Herro, Kel'el Ware, Jaime Jaquez Jr., Kasparas Jakucionis, the No. 13 pick in the 2026 NBA Draft, unprotected first-round picks in 2031 and 2033, a 2030 pick swap, and a 2033 second-round pick to the Bucks for Giannis Antetokounmpo and Bobby Portis. That move brought a top-five player in the world to South Beach and cracked open a championship window that had been slammed shut.

We'll now see what a frontcourt of Antetokounmpo and Bam Adebayo looks like, surrounded by competent role players and coached by Erik Spoelstra, one of the best tacticians in the history of the sport.

This group has question marks heading into 2026-27 — luckily, we have some "Burning Questions" for that — but Miami simply couldn't keep doing things the way it had. The Jimmy Butler Era produced two trips to the NBA Finals, but the late stages of his tenure meant competing in the Play-In Tournament and hoping for an early-round playoff upset. Then, once Butler was traded, the Heat were just hoping to make the Play-In Tournament. The cycle of being caught in the middle was exhausting and unproductive.

Now, we'll see what the Heat can do with a legitimate franchise player leading the way. Antetokounmpo didn't play much last season, but he still averaged 27.6 points, 9.8 rebounds, and 5.4 assists per game, and we know he can lock up on defense when he's motivated.

Miami has a puncher's chance now. We'll see what Spoelstra can cook up in a suddenly loaded Eastern Conference. At the very least, I see this being a team that does very well in the regular season, making the Over on 45.5 wins an enticing play.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

2.0

#13

ADJUSTED NET RATING

115.8

#12

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

113.9

#13

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How will Giannis and Bam coexist offensively?

When Miami acquired Antetokounmpo, people instantly wondered whether he and Adebayo could play well together. Both do most of their work inside the arc, meaning there could be a lack of spacing in the starting five. However, throughout Spoelstra's career, the brilliant head coach has done an awesome job of making pieces fit together.

Adebayo also made a career-high 1.7 threes per game last year, becoming a true shooting threat for the first time in his career. Sure, he needs to improve on his 31.7% clip. But he deserves the benefit of the doubt after making so much progress last season. If he can continue evolving into a serviceable floor spacer, that will drastically raise this team's ceiling.

These are also two unique players. Both guys can handle the basketball and see the floor extremely well. We could see some interesting stuff in which these two are screening for one another.

Do the Heat have enough backcourt juice?

The main focus with Miami is how the Antetokounmpo-Adebayo duo will look offensively and whether the team has enough shooting. The latter was seemingly addressed with the Heat signing Klay Thompson and Tim Hardaway Jr. — and drafting Ryan Conwell.

Miami now has a bunch of shooting specialists, with Simone Fontecchio another one. The Heat also have Pelle Larsson — recently signed to a new deal — and Davion Mitchell to knock down shots. Larsson isn't a reliable stand-still shooter yet, but he's trending that way. Meanwhile, Mitchell has become deadly on catch-and-shoot attempts. And while he's not a guard, don't forget Portis was in the Antetokounmpo trade. He's one of the best three-point shooters in basketball.

Now that we've addressed two main concerns, let's touch on another. As people poked holes in this roster construction, Riley himself brought up playmaking as a potential weak spot. I know I shouldn't question the basketball intelligence of someone who has won nine NBA titles as a player, assistant coach, head coach, and executive. But Miami had a top-10 Assist Rate (66.3%) last season, Mitchell averaged 6.5 assists per game, and Antetokounmpo's playmaking should make up for the offseason departures.

I say all of that to say I have no major issues with this backcourt.

Should Miami actually be taken seriously as a title contender?

The Heat might have question marks offensively, but they're going to be a top-five team in the league defensively. They have four plus-level defenders in their starting five in Mitchell, Andrew Wiggins, Antetokounmpo, and Adebayo, plus a bunch of rotation players that work hard on that end.

A feisty, switchable defense gives you a chance against anyone in the postseason, and having Antetokounmpo to dump the ball to gives the Heat a reasonably high floor on offense. Miami will need to be taken very seriously in every postseason series.

As of right now, the Heat should be considered a fringe contender because of how tough it'll be to overcome them in a best-of-seven series. But to comfortably consider them a top-tier team, Spoelstra will need to build this into a top-12 offense. I wouldn't rule it out, but the best version of Miami could be an offseason away.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 45.5

DID YOU KNOW: MIAMI WAS 13-4 SU & ATS IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON



MILWAUKEE BUCKS

EASTERN • CENTRAL

2025-26 Records: 32-50 SU & 36-46 ATS, 39-43 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

800-1

NBA FINALS

250-1

CONFERENCE

250-1

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING

91.5 (#29 OF 30)

The Bucks finally caved. After years of will-they-or-won't-they, Milwaukee traded Giannis Antetokounmpo (and Bobby Portis) to Miami for Tyler Herro, Kel'el Ware, Jaime Jaquez Jr., Kasparas Jakucionis, and significant draft capital. The deal ended up being a little better than a "we had no choice" move, but not bringing in a proven blue-chip youngster hurts. Fortunately, the Bucks can still make the deal better by flipping Herro, who has real value around the league.

We're now seeing the early stages of a developmental project in Milwaukee. The team brought in former Grizzlies head coach Taylor Jenkins, who was the franchise's winningest coach and made the playoffs in three of his six seasons. He was also widely praised for his ability to develop young talent. All of that went into the Bucks giving him a six-year deal.

Milwaukee awkwardly has a bunch of serviceable veterans on the roster. In fact, none of the youngsters appear ready to crack the starting five, which will likely feature Herro, Jaquez, Ryan Rollins, Kyle Kuzma, and Myles Turner. That should mean rookies Brayden Burries and Nate Ament will come off the bench, along with Ware and last year's surprisingly good pickup, Ousmane Dieng.

For a roster that looks extremely weird, this might be a fun team to watch on NBA League Pass early in the season. But it's hard to imagine this team consistently winning games, and it's one of the few bottom-tier teams I'd be fading late in the year. Milwaukee should be an active seller at the trade deadline, and the remaining group could struggle to win against motivated teams.

The Under on 25.5 looks like the only play to make in what should be a bit of a depressing season for the Bucks. It's at least nice that Milwaukee knows what the future holds with Antetokounmpo now in South Beach.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-5.9

#25

ADJUSTED NET RATING

112.4

#24

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

118.4

#27

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Which of the young guys will stand out?

Last year, after the Bucks picked him up, the 6-foot-9 Dieng averaged 11.0 points and 4.6 rebounds per game. Milwaukee ended up bringing him back on a three-year, \$17.25 million deal, so it's clear he impressed the decision-makers. Dieng has the potential to be a good two-way wing in this league, but he needs to keep improving the jumper.

Ware is the best prospect who came over from Miami. The 22-year-old has rubbed a bunch of coaches the wrong way, but he averaged 11.1 points, 9.0 rebounds, and 1.1 blocks per game last season. He is a defensive presence around the rim, and he has the potential to be a floor-spacing big on offense. We'll see if Jenkins can get through to him. It should excite Ware that he's now playing for the same guy who developed Jaren Jackson Jr.

I also wouldn't sleep on Jakucionis. He was a smaller part of the Antetokounmpo trade, but he's a big guard with a nice jumper and the ability to rack up assists as a pick-and-roll operator.

The real focal points in Milwaukee will be the two 2026 first-rounders, though. Burries was an absolute killer at Arizona last year, and he could turn into one of the league's better three-level scorers at his position. He's extremely tough to cover when attacking the rim, he's a good shooter, and he's smooth with the ball in his hands.

Ament has a little less upside than Burries, as he's not very comfortable creating offense for himself. But he does have a high floor as a potential three-and-D player.

Will Myles Turner bounce back?

In my Pacers write-up, I noted that Turner's defensive metrics have been sliding. His offensive efficiency also fell off a cliff in his first season with Milwaukee. Was he just struggling to adjust to a new situation, or is this who he is now?

If Turner starts the season playing solid two-way basketball, there's a good chance his contract will be movable for the Bucks. Playoff teams like bigs who can space the floor and contest shots at the rim. However, if last year was a sign of things to come, Turner's contract will be a short-term problem for Milwaukee, even if he is a good locker room presence.

How many of the veterans will be on the roster after the trade deadline?

This team could look drastically different come February. Plenty of contenders could use some of Milwaukee's players, even if they're just serving as depth pieces. Herro is the main player to watch. If any borderline playoff teams are in need of scoring, the first call could go out to the Bucks. The Pistons seemingly sniffed around on Herro while the Antetokounmpo packages were being formed. Maybe we'll see those talks revisited.

If Turner gets himself right, he'll be viewed as an option for teams. Toronto had some level of interest over the summer.

I'll be keeping an eye on Rollins and Jaquez, though. Rollins is a very good two-way contributor at point, and he's on a super cheap deal. Jaquez was a winning player off the bench for the Heat, and he can make that impact anywhere.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

UNDER 25.5

DID YOU KNOW: MILWAUKEE BOASTED A 9-7 SU & 11-5 ATS RECORD IN DIVISIONAL GAMES LAST SEASON



MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES

WESTERN • NORTHWEST

2025-26 Records: 55-39 SU & 43-51 ATS, 45-49 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

23-1

NBA FINALS

11-1

CONFERENCE

+850

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 101 (#7 OF 30)

It's not often a team can rebuild the plane while it is in the air, but that is seemingly what Minnesota did this offseason. The Timberwolves of the last few seasons were a big, plodding team that relied on its size and defense to consistently compete in the Western Conference. However, it seems general manager Matt Lloyd and president of basketball operations Tim Connelly saw enough.

The Timberwolves have completely shifted their DNA to a more sleek, skilled roster archetype. Julius Randle and Naz Reid are gone. LaMelo Ball was the massive trade acquisition, and the retaining of Ayo Dosunmu now gives this team a whole new identity. Gone is the team built to beat Denver. In its place is a team that is smaller and more versatile and should be able to compete in a very skilled conference.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

2.7

#10

ADJUSTED NET RATING

115.5

#13

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

112.8

#8

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What can Ball do for the Minnesota Timberwolves?

First and foremost, he can dribble a basketball, and that is not just a joke. The Timberwolves' offense lacked a true second option as a ball-handler and facilitator outside of Anthony Edwards. Simple double-teams would throw wrenches into Minnesota's offense. Edwards is a great scorer, but navigating doubles and running the offense should not fall on his shoulders. Enter LaMelo. Ball's presence immediately relieves that pressure. A double of Edwards now gives the ball to Ball with him and three others owning the brief personnel advantage in those situations. He is also a great pairing with Rudy Gobert, who can serve as a lob threat on pick-and-rolls with Ball in control. There are obviously concerns. Specifically, Ball's availability has been an issue. He's played more than 47 games in a season just once since his second year in the league. Ball can also be a chucker, as evidenced by his 40.7% shooting from the floor last season. Still, he is a very good fit for the Timberwolves, and it all works on paper.

Is a monster season loading for Edwards?

Edwards has clearly established himself as one of the best scorers in the NBA. The 2025-26 season brought a career high in points per game (28.8), field goal percentage (48.9%), and three-point percentage (39.9%), as well as a handful of other advanced metrics. Where Edwards has picked up his game is at the rim, where he hit a career-best 71.3% of his attempts. He did this without a true secondary option next to him on offense. Now, he has two. Ball is obviously a scoring threat that teams will have to respect, and Finch can get versatile now with his lineups and toss out Dosunmu to play with Ball and Edwards, giving opposing defenses some real issues with three ball-handling scoring threats on the floor at once. All of this should lead to a floor that has likely never been as open as it will be for Edwards this season. If the former top overall pick can maintain his efficiency, this season has the makings of one in which he can truly contend for MVP, for which he is 18-1 to win at DraftKings.

How do the personnel changes alter the Timberwolves' defensive identity?

Minnesota was built on its defense the last few seasons, but with the departures of both Randle and Reid, this team is now much smaller. The potential starting five for the Timberwolves is likely Ball, Edwards, and Gobert with Jaden McDaniels and perhaps Jonathan Kuminga on the wing. McDaniels is an extremely gifted on-ball defender, but he is small for a power forward. Last season, when McDaniels played the four, the Timberwolves were outscored by 8.7 points per 100 possessions. He only played 5% of his minutes there, but it is a good illustration of what might ail Minnesota this season. Gobert is still one of the most effective defenders in the league. When he was on the floor last season, the Timberwolves allowed 11.8 fewer points per 100 possessions, and opponents' effective field goal percentage dropped by 4.1%. But the team must avoid being overly reliant on Gobert to clean up all the messes. Minnesota finished last season sixth in non-garbage-time defensive efficiency. It wouldn't be stunning to see them slip just a bit.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 47.5

DID YOU KNOW: MINNESOTA WAS 30-17 UNDER AT HOME, 28-19 UNDER ON THE ROAD ON TOTALS LY



NEW ORLEANS PELICANS

WESTERN • SOUTHWEST
2025-26 Records: 26-56 SU & 44-38 ATS, 41-41 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

250-1 NBA FINALS
100-1 CONFERENCE
225-1 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
93 (#28 OF 30)

It seems it will be more of the same for New Orleans this season. The Pelicans' front office did almost nothing in terms of personnel changes for a roster that eked out 26 wins and missed the Western Conference Play-In by 11 games. The only impactful free agent who was added was Bennedict Mathurin, and the only player drafted was second-round guard Jaron Pierre Jr. out of SMU.

The biggest change was bringing in Jamahl Mosley, who was fired by Orlando this last offseason for failing to achieve at the highest level with a roster the front office heavily invested in. Perhaps Mosley is better suited for a roster like New Orleans', which has some decent young building blocks. Even if that is true, it is hard to picture a massive leap from last season given the front office is content in running it back.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-4.2
#21

ADJUSTED NET RATING

113.4
#20

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

117.6
#23

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How will Jeremiah Fears and Derik Queen follow up strong rookie seasons?

Of the two, Queen was the biggest revelation for New Orleans last season. The 13th overall pick finished the season averaging 11.7 points, 7.1 rebounds, and 3.7 assists per game on 47.3% shooting from the floor. Queen's 21.3% assist rate was in the 95th percentile for his position, and his 0.91 assist-to-usage rate was good for the 80th percentile. Near the tail end of the season, Queen seemed to fall out of favor with interim head coach James Borrego. Particularly in a tough March in which he averaged only 8.8 points, 4.9 rebounds, and 2.3 assists per game on 19.7 minutes per contest. Fears' impact was not as strong, but at 14.3 points and 3.4 assists per game, the seventh-overall pick showed a feel for the game. Fears is also extremely young and comes into the 2026-27 season having freshly turned 20 years old. When the duo played together, the Pelicans ranked in the 24th percentile in net rating. It wasn't all gold, but there is clearly something here, and Mosley will be charged with unlocking its potential.

Can Zion Williamson do it again?

The painful irony of last season for Pelicans fans and bettors was that they finally got to see what was essentially a full season for Zion Williamson. The former first overall pick played in over 60 games for just the third time in his career. He averaged 21 points, 5.7 rebounds, and 3.2 assists per game on 60% shooting from the floor. But he did not have the impact that he once did in his career. New Orleans was still outscored by 2.3 points per 100 possessions with Williamson on the floor. To his credit, it seems Williamson is approaching this season with urgency. He is reportedly down nearly 10 pounds as training camp gets started. He will also reportedly start to incorporate more jump shots to his game, something that is sorely needed. Williamson shot just five long mid-range jumpers last season and missed all five. He took four three-point attempts and hit only one. Williamson is an effective finisher, but he cannot be a complete non-factor from the perimeter. Prop bettors should look out for the change in his game this season.

Will Mosley get it right this time around?

It went south quickly for Mosley in Orlando. Some of that was due, in part, to a front office that had pushed its chips in, and with that comes heightened expectations. But Mosley did his part as well. The Magic never found even a semblance of decent offensive play. His teams in Orlando never finished better than 18th in non-garbage-time offensive efficiency, and no better than 17th in halfcourt offensive rating. Thus, it isn't exactly thrilling to hear that Bret Brielmaier joins Mosley from his time running the offense in Orlando. Mosley can get the most out of a defense — that is almost guaranteed. The Magic were an elite defensive team in his time there, and they finished 11th or better in defensive rating — including second for two straight seasons — in four of his five years at the helm. But it will be a different task for Mosley in New Orleans. In Orlando, the expectation was playoff berths and competing for championships. That will come with the Pelicans, but clearly the priority will be to develop a young core and make sure players improve. Does Mosley have that in his bag?

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 29.5

DID YOU KNOW: NEW ORLEANS POSTED A 32-19 ATS RECORD VS. FELLOW WESTERN CONFERENCE FOES LAST SEASON



NEW YORK KNICKS

EASTERN • ATLANTIC

2025-26 Records: 70-32 SU & 58-44 ATS, 48-54 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

+850 NBA FINALS

+315 CONFERENCE

+160 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
103 (#3 OF 30)

The Knicks finally did it. After a 53-year wait, New York beat San Antonio in five games to bring an NBA title back to Madison Square Garden for the first time since 1973. They did it with one of the most dominant postseason runs in league history. The Knicks went 16-3, won 12 games by double digits, and lost their three games by a combined six points. Along the way, they reeled off 13 straight wins, the second-longest streak in playoff history.

After the clincher, the streets of New York looked like a scene out of *The Dark Knight*. Fortunately, things eventually calmed down, and Knicks fans spent the entire summer rocking blue and orange and enjoying the championship together. The core players also became global celebrities, with Karl-Anthony Towns even popping up in *The Devil Wears Prada 2*.

Now comes the hard part. New York must forget what happened last season and focus on winning again. Repeating in the NBA is brutal, which is why nobody has done it since the Kevin Durant Warriors teams.

The good news for the Knicks is that all five starters are back, which gives this group a legitimate shot. The only major roster change is the departure of Mitchell Robinson, who signed a three-year deal with Boston. The Knicks signed Andre Drummond to replace him.

Otherwise, the issues with this franchise are off the court. Towns and Josh Hart are both unhappy that their extensions haven't gotten done, and that's never a good look. Worse, James Dolan is weaseling his way back into the picture. The final buzzer of Game 5 had barely sounded when he went on WFAN and said the Knicks won't be going into the second apron. Couldn't he crawl into a cave for a couple of weeks and let New Yorkers enjoy their damn title?

Still, the Knicks enter 2026-27 as defending champs, and they belong in the conversation with every true contender. Nobody should count them out.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

6.1
#5

ADJUSTED NET RATING

118.8
#4

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

112.7
#7

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How big is the loss of Robinson?

It's nice having someone like Robinson coming off the bench. He's one of the most versatile defensive bigs in the NBA, capable of holding his own on the perimeter and putting a lid on the rim. He was also a big reason the Knicks posted one of the best offensive rebound rates in basketball last year (32.8%). He personally pulled down 4.2 offensive boards per game.

Will he be easy to replace? Absolutely not. But Drummond has proven to be one of the more capable backup bigs in the league, and a highly competitive environment should bring out even more in him as a scrapper. It also sounds like the Knicks will keep surveying the market for additional center help.

New York's title run featured outrageous shot-making, connectivity on both ends of the floor, and an insatiable desire to avoid losses. Losing Robinson isn't enough to suck those qualities out of the Knicks.

What makes New York different from previous teams that failed to repeat?

It might sound corny to say competitive drive is the main differentiator between New York and past champions, but the Knicks genuinely have a different DNA than most. They erased six double-digit deficits in last year's playoffs, including a 29-point hole in Game 4 against San Antonio. That hunger will carry over. This is exactly the type of group that wants to prove last year's run was no fluke, and it would love to end the repeat-champion drought.

The numbers back it up, too. New York posted a +15.4 Net Rating across 19 playoff games. The lineup of Jalen Brunson, Hart, OG Anunoby, Mikal Bridges, and Towns has proven to be one of the best in league history. It might be hard to summon the focus and motivation for another 82-game season, so this may not be an Over team on the win total. But with those five on the floor in the playoffs, the Knicks are the team to beat in the East. And if there's another Finals at the Garden, lack of focus won't be an option.

Will Towns' lack of a contract be a distraction?

On Monday, October 5, word came out that Towns isn't anywhere near a deal with New York. Perhaps that changes by the time this guide is published, or shortly after. Either way, it's not something the Knicks need to be worrying about as they attempt something extremely difficult.

Towns is eligible for an extension worth up to \$277 million, but New York is offering around \$200 million. That's a pretty wide gap. Luckily, the players on this team are very close with one another, so they should be able to keep Towns focused. Mike Brown also happens to be very good at easing tension.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 52.5

DID YOU KNOW: NEW YORK WAS
FANTASTIC AT HOME LAST SEASON, 37-12
SU & 32-17 ATS



OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

WESTERN • NORTHWEST
2025-26 Records: 75-22 SU & 47-50 ATS, 55-42 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

+255 NBA FINALS
+150 CONFERENCE
-465 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 104 (#1 OF 30)

Life comes at you fast in the NBA. Two years ago, the Oklahoma City Thunder were raising the Larry O'Brien Trophy, and many were planning for a dynasty and multiple championships. The latter could still happen, but it was put on pause last season when Oklahoma City was unceremoniously bounced in the Western Conference Finals by San Antonio.

What followed was an offseason in which the Thunder roster underwent some changes. Lu Dort, Isaiah Joe, and Aaron Wiggins were sent off in trades due to financial restrictions caused by the extensions of Jalen Williams and Chet Holmgren kicking in. Oklahoma City still has championship potential, but it's never good when finances inspire offseason change. Can the internal promotions on this roster keep the team at the level it expects to be at?

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

10.8

#1

ADJUSTED NET RATING

117.5

#7

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

106.7

#1

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Will Oklahoma City finally be able to find its shooting stroke?

Yes, the Thunder are a good three-point shooting team, but they are not a great three-point shooting team, and that showed in each of the last two seasons, specifically in the playoffs. Oklahoma City's shooting took a dip in the regular season last year, as it fell from 38.2% as a team to 36.6%. In the postseason, the Thunder shot 29.8% from deep in losses. They shot 32.0% in the postseason prior to that. It has been a consistent issue for a team as talented as Oklahoma City is. Now, they must figure out that issue with the losses of Dort, Joe, and Wiggins, all of whom were key shooters on this roster. Joe and Wiggins shot 42% and 36% from deep, respectively, last season. That is a massive loss. There are pieces in place to replace them — Cason Wallace and Ajay Mitchell — but both were on the roster last season. It certainly is not a positive for the Thunder to have to replace those three, especially when the same issue has popped up in each of the last two seasons.

Is it fair to ask more of Holmgren?

It seems like an insane question on its surface. Holmgren is coming off a season in which he set career highs in points per game (17.1), rebounds per game (8.9), and field goal percentage (55.7%). In his minutes on the floor, the Thunder's net rating improved by 9.5 points per 100 possessions, and they allowed 8.7 fewer points. But in the postseason, that production dipped. Holmgren's points per game dropped 14.9, and he shot just 35.7% from deep. He averaged 0.4 fewer blocks per contest. But most importantly, he disappeared in the Western Conference Finals. Against San Antonio, Holmgren averaged 10.7 points and 7.1 rebounds and shot just 27.3% from beyond the arc. That cannot happen to someone set to make \$41.2 million. It could just be one bad series for Holmgren, but we all remember what we saw last, and what we saw was not good. With a thinner roster — in part due to that \$41.2 million — more should be expected of the Thunder big man.

Do the Thunder have two burgeoning stars set for bigger roles?

One of the biggest surprises in a disappointing season for Oklahoma City was the emergence of Mitchell. The former Santa Barbara guard doubled up his points-per-game output to 13.6 points on 5.3 more shot attempts per game. But it was more than that. Thrust into a larger role in the postseason, Mitchell responded. In the series win over Los Angeles, the second-year pro averaged 22.5 points on 56.3% shooting from the floor. The Thunder hope a larger role will mean great things for Mitchell, but he is hardly the only rising star. Many have been waiting for the emergence of Wallace. Once a lottery selection, Wallace has shown his impact on both ends of the floor, but now he is likely stepping into a starting role with the changes this roster has gone through in the offseason. Wallace's shooting dipped to 35.1% last season and has quietly declined each season since his rookie year. That will need to be picked back up, but he's a strong defender who averaged 1.9 steals per game last season. If he can crack double digits in scoring, the Thunder might be in good hands despite the offseason losses.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 61.5

DID YOU KNOW: OKLAHOMA CITY WAS JUST 7-7 SU & 4-10 ATS IN THE SECOND OF BACK-TO-BACK GAMES LAST SEASON



ORLANDO MAGIC

EASTERN • SOUTHEAST

2025-26 Records: 49-42 SU & 43-48 ATS, 47-44 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

85-1 NBA FINALS

28-1 CONFERENCE

+357 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 98.5 (#16 OF 30)

After a disappointing, injury-plagued 2025-26 regular season, Orlando nearly upset top-seeded Detroit in the first round of the playoffs. The Pistons won a home Game 7 by 22, but the Magic gave a strong overall effort and might have won had Franz Wagner been available after Game 4. Still, keeping things tight against the No. 1 seed wasn't enough to save Jamahl Mosley's job, and he may have been out even with a win.

Reporting suggested Mosley and star Paolo Banchero no longer saw eye to eye, and it felt like he had taken the Magic as far as he could. So the front office hired highly coveted San Antonio assistant Sean Sweeney.

Like Mosley, Sweeney is known as a defensive-minded coach, so the Magic aren't exactly reinventing the wheel. But they wanted to give their current core one last shot at figuring it out, and they felt a new voice could help. That voice played a big role in helping the Spurs reach the NBA Finals last year.

Banchero and Wagner will again lead the way, with Desmond Bane supplying perimeter firepower. Jalen Suggs will be the floor general while digging in at the point of attack. He better be on his game, though, because Anthony Black is nipping at his heels and eager to claim the starting point guard spot.

The Magic didn't do much to improve the roster. Their one meaningful acquisition was bringing back Nikola Vucevic, who will back up Wendell Carter Jr. at center. Orlando is hoping Sweeney, along with better luck on the injury front, will finally solve this puzzle. To an extent, I think he will. I like the Over on 43.5 and believe this team can break out again.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

1.0
#17

ADJUSTED NET RATING

114.4
#18

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

113.4
#11

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How will Sweeney shake things up?

Last season, Orlando finished 11th in the NBA in Adjusted Defensive Rating (113.4), snapping a two-year streak of finishing exactly third. Sweeney ran the defense for the Spurs, so expect tweaks. However, Sweeney would sign up for some of the Magic's recent defensive success.

Based on Sweeney's comments since being hired, Orlando will very likely ramp up ball pressure and physicality. Mosley leaned heavily on the length on his roster and hoped for maximum effort at all times. Sweeney, known for his strong attention to detail, will bring a little more structure.

Sweeney also seems to run circles around Mosley as an offensive coach. That might not be what he's known for, but Orlando will play with more purpose. Sweeney wants his players settled into clear roles, so there will be less of the Magic rolling the ball out and letting everyone do whatever they want. He also wants Orlando to play much faster, set drastically more screens, and prioritize spacing. The last one is easier said than done without good shooting, but Sweeney doesn't want Wagner and Banchero attacking packed paints.

The Magic likely won't be a top-10 offense as long as this core is around. But they did finish 18th in aORTG (114.4) last year, snapping a 13-year streak of finishing 20th or worse. If Sweeney can turn this into a top-15 offense, the Magic would be thrilled.

Will Banchero and Wagner show signs of life as a pairing?

There's no leap coming without Banchero and Wagner getting on the same page. Sweeney has been impressed with what he has seen from them together, but little suggests the two enjoy playing with one another.

It's almost shocking how little they have competed together given how long they've been in Orlando. The Magic always seem to be playing without one of them, and both players seem to prefer that.

Over the last two years, Orlando's Net Rating is only +3.2 in the minutes they've shared. That's not good enough for two players combining to make over \$80 million.

It's on Banchero to find a way to fit in. The 2023 Rookie of the Year is always good for big numbers, and he has been excellent as an isolation scorer in the postseason. But Wagner is a winning player. He takes good shots, he's an excellent playmaker, and he's a high-level defender who guards multiple positions. Banchero doesn't impact the game in nearly as many ways, and he's a ball-stopper on offense. He has to start taking pride in doing some of the little things.

Is Black the most important player nobody's talking about?

A few weeks ago, Suggs apologized to Magic fans for his postseason play. He's the ideal point-of-attack defender and can occasionally get hot from three, but his percentages have been down for years, his three-ball abandoned him against the Pistons, and he can't stay healthy. At some point, the Magic will have to consider giving Black a shot at the starting job.

Black still has work to do as a shooter, but he averaged a career-high 15.0 points per game last season. He also posted a Defensive Estimated Plus-Minus of +0.5, and as a 6-foot-7 lead guard, he can disrupt multiple spots.

The 22-year-old is coming on fast, and he's arguably the best blue-chip youngster in the NBA that people aren't paying attention to. The Magic don't have many avenues for improvement, but if Black keeps getting better, Orlando will be in much better shape.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 43.5

DID YOU KNOW: ORLANDO WAS
JUST 25-36 ATS VS. FELLOW EASTERN
CONFERENCE FOES LAST SEASON



PHILADELPHIA 76ERS

EASTERN • ATLANTIC

2025-26 Records: 50-44 SU & 50-44 ATS, 46-48 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

+850

NBA FINALS

+325

CONFERENCE

+225

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
101.5 (#4 OF 30)

The 76ers surprised the Celtics by knocking them out in a seven-game series in the opening round of last year's playoffs. Boston was apparently so impressed that it felt only right to gift Philadelphia with Jaylen Brown. Well, that's not exactly how it went down, but we did see the Celtics ship the two-time All-NBA Second-Team wing to Philly for Paul George and a couple of picks. The deal was appalling for many reasons, one being that other front office executives felt the Sixers should have had to attach a first-rounder or two just to get off George's salary.

Landing Brown alone had people feeling bullish on Philadelphia. Adding a talent like that to Tyrese Maxey, Joel Embiid, and VJ Edgecombe would have been interesting enough. You know who else was excited? LeBron James.

When James and the Lakers mutually parted ways, it was made known that the 41-year-old would play on a veteran's minimum deal in order to run with a contender. After taking his time to sort through his options, James decided the Sixers gave him the best shot at another title. They also give him the closest experience to playing for a New York team, since he's commuting via helicopter from Manhattan to Philly.

James obviously isn't the player he once was. However, he's still a basketball genius who can give you 20-5-5 on any given night. On the contract he's currently playing on, there's no better value in basketball.

The 76ers made some other good pickups, too, bringing in Anfernee Simons, Dean Wade, and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope to bolster the bench.

This team is absolutely loaded entering the 2026-27 season, and Nick Nurse is the right type of head coach to maximize that potential. Still, Philadelphia will only be as good as health allows, which makes this a difficult group to handicap. There's definitely potential for a run to the NBA Finals, but the Under on the win total is the only way to bet the Sixers right now. James and Embiid will surely miss a ton of games.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

0.0

#18

ADJUSTED NET RATING

114.4

#17

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

114.4

#16

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Can Embiid stay healthy?

Nothing Philadelphia did in the offseason will matter if Embiid can't make himself available. He has played fewer than 40 regular-season games in three consecutive years. He did turn in a bit of a throwback performance against the Celtics in last year's playoffs, but playing 36.5 minutes per game of high-level basketball left him absolutely drained for the series against the Knicks.

I'm not sure what Philadelphia's plan is for keeping him healthy, but there had better be an aggressive one in place to keep him out of harm's way — especially with backup center Ariel Hukporti having suffered a torn Achilles in preseason.

The one positive heading into the year is that Embiid lost a significant amount of weight and looks the best he has in nearly a decade, which probably has something to do with James being around to motivate him. Playing lighter should take some pressure off Embiid's knees.

Are there too many egos for the team to thrive in the playoffs?

You hear it all the time: "There's only one ball to go around." It's a real concern in the NBA, where the best teams move the ball and get everyone involved. The Sixers have a roster full of players who need the basketball, with Brown being the main concern. Last year, he ranked third in the NBA in Usage Rate (35.1%), and that's just not going to happen again with this roster. Is he alright with that?

Fortunately, the Sixers have James to deal with these problems. Philadelphia's players get the luxury of playing through The King, who will know exactly how shots should be distributed in key moments. That's actually part of the reason I was hoping he would return to Cleveland. I loved the idea of him making the right decisions for a Cavs team that struggled with decision-making against New York.

Perhaps it's a bit naive of me, but I just can't bring myself to worry about the offense of a team with this much talent. However...

Will the team be tough enough defensively?

It's easy to get excited about the 76ers offense, with Maxey and Edgecombe doing explosive young people stuff next to the brilliance of James, the three-level scoring of Brown, and the low-post domination of Embiid. My issue with Philadelphia is the defense.

Edgecombe and Brown will compete defensively every single night. Maxey, though, has been a weak defender throughout his career, James is no longer willing to dig in for 48 minutes, and Embiid's defensive impact has faded as his mobility has decreased. For all the talk of the Sixers having a bunch of high-usage players to sort out offensively, defense is where Philadelphia must prove it can be a true contender.

Don't sleep on the possibility of Wade playing more minutes than expected in key situations. He's one of the few defensive-minded players on the roster, and he can guard multiple spots.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 51.5

DID YOU KNOW: PHILADELPHIA WAS 14-7 UNDER THE TOTAL PLAYING WITH 2+ DAYS REST LAST SEASON



PHOENIX SUNS

WESTERN • PACIFIC

2025-26 Records: 46-42 SU & 50-38 ATS, 41-47 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

250-1

NBA FINALS

50-1

CONFERENCE

+325

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 97 (#18 OF 30)

Phoenix emerged last season as a surprisingly competent bunch under head coach Jordan Ott. The Suns won a spot in the Western Conference postseason after a 45-win season and a win in the Play-In Tournament over the Warriors in the winner-take-all meeting. They were eventually swept by the Thunder, but the Suns enter this season with confidence after a strong 2025-26 campaign.

The offseason for Phoenix was largely a quiet one, save a quizzical move in shipping off an unprotected 2033 first-round pick for Miles Bridges, who is on an expiring contract as of this writing. Clearly, the edict is to maximize this roster and make another run at the postseason. The ceiling seems very distant from a championship, but another dalliance with a top seed in the first round of the postseason is attainable for Phoenix this season.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

1.4

#15

ADJUSTED NET RATING

114.5

#16

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

113.1

#10

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What can Jalen Green do for you?

The acquisition of Green last season was one of the more fascinating ones, but we hardly got to see it work. Due to injury, Green appeared in just 32 games for Phoenix last season. The counting stats were fine — he averaged 17.8 points, 3.6 rebounds, and 2.8 assists on 42.2% shooting from the floor — but he was hardly a positive for the Suns. Their net rating declined by a point per 100 possessions with him on the floor. His usage rate of 31.6% in those 32 games was a career high, but his 10.7 points per 100 shot attempts was a career low. Green was a solid facilitator — he finished in the 86th percentile in assist rate at his position, a career high — but that was one of the few statistics in which he came out looking clean. There is still room for growth here. When Green was on the floor with Devin Booker and Dillon Brooks, the Suns averaged 120.1 points per 100 possessions. If he can rein in the shot selection, there is a diamond in the rough with those three playing together that can be shaped into something beautiful.

What in the world is the point of Bridges?

Bridges is the basketball equivalent of steamed rice: empty calories. Bridges is coming off a season in which he averaged the fewest points since 2020-21 and the fewest minutes per game since 2021-22. But it's not even the statistical decline, which isn't even that stark; it's just that he has never truly improved a team. Despite averaging 17.9 points and 5.8 rebounds per game for Charlotte, the Hornets saw their net rating decline by 5.9 points per 100 possessions with Bridges on the floor. He is a subpar defender who has worsened Charlotte's defensive rating every season but one in his time in the league. Bridges is also a relatively high-usage player — he has finished in the 75th percentile or higher in usage rate in each of the last four seasons — joining a team filled with already high-usage players. Throw in his contract status, and it is a move that makes little sense for a team that believes it can make a push for a better seed than it had achieved a season ago.

Where do the youths fit in with all of this?

Phoenix does have a fun group of young-ish players with seemingly bright futures on this roster. Collin Gillespie quietly had a very strong season for the Suns, and it led to him locking in a four-year, \$48 million contract in the summer. Gillespie upped his scoring average to 12.7 points per game while maintaining a 40.1% shooting percentage from deep. He also finished in the 71st percentile in assist rate, his second consecutive season having achieved that benchmark. Unlike Bridges, he was a massive positive on the floor, improving the Suns' net rating by 5.1 points per 100 possessions. Ryan Dunn still has some promise to his game, and second-year center Khaman Maluach showed some potential in 46 games last season. The starting five is chock-full of veterans who are there to maximize the potential, but the bench has a lot of young upside. If players like Dunn and Maluach emerge, this team could be much deeper than it was a season ago.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

UNDER 40.5

DID YOU KNOW: PHOENIX WAS 36-22 ATS
IN WESTERN CONFERENCE ACTION IN
THE 2025-26 SEASON



PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

WESTERN • NORTHWEST
2025-26 Records: 44-44 SU & 46-42 ATS, 45-43 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

100-1 NBA FINALS
37-1 CONFERENCE
38-1 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
97 (#21 OF 30)

Portland was one of the better stories last season. The Trail Blazers overcame the arrest of former head coach Chauncey Billups in October and, under interim coach Tiago Splitter, made the postseason. Despite that, an offseason of drama ensued, most of which was caused by owner Tom Dundon.

Once the smoke of a tumultuous offseason cleared, Portland emerged with a new coach in Micah Nori and a newly acquired star in Ja Morant. The roster is an interesting one that has a logjam of guards, but Nori is a widely respected coach who is finally getting his shot to lead a team. Whether the Trail Blazers can make it back to the postseason remains to be seen, but this is a team that should be in contention for a spot at the table once again.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-0.3
#20

ADJUSTED NET RATING

113.2
#21

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

113.5
#12

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How in the world do all these guards work together?

Nori made headlines during media days for Portland when he said the quiet part out loud: Morant and Damian Lillard in a starting backcourt "doesn't make sense." He's not wrong. Both Morant and Lillard are ball-dominant guards who work best running the show. Morant specifically is a terrible fit next to Lillard when he is without the ball, as he does not provide a true shooting threat for opponents to respect. Nori will not only have to navigate the workload and rotations for both Lillard and Morant, but he also has a guard room that consists of Scoot Henderson, Shaedon Sharpe, and Jrue Holiday. And it's not just the mouths that need to be fed, but each of the guards on paper boasts skill sets that do not seem to jive with one another. At some point, it will come down to the big names. Will Lillard and Morant be willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the team? Morant just left a situation in which he caused a ruckus due to his unhappiness with how he was being deployed. What makes us think he will be on his best behavior in Portland?

What does Deni Avdija do for an encore performance?

This will be Avdija's third season in Portland, but last season was a coming-out party for the 2020 lottery pick. Avdija averaged career highs in points (24.2) and assists (6.7) for the Trail Blazers. When he was on the floor, he improved the Trail Blazers' offensive efficiency by 5.9 points per 100 possessions. He ended up finishing third in Most Improved Player voting, but he was clearly one of the best development stories of the league. How can he follow that up? One way could be by improving his shooting. Avdija shot just 32.1% on three-point attempts last season and 25.0% on pull-up three-point jumpers. Portland as a team did not shoot the ball well last season — they hit just 34.5% from deep as a team — but Avdija has to be better. The presence of Lillard should improve the spacing for this group overall, and his presence will mean more room to operate for Avdija, but if he adds a consistent three-point shot to his game, it will be massive for him and the Trail Blazers.

Can Nori keep the team's defensive trajectory going?

Portland built its postseason run last year on its defense. The Trail Blazers finished 12th in non-garbage-time defensive efficiency, allowing just 114.5 points per 100 possessions. They supplemented their poor offense by forcing turnovers on 15.3% of opponent possessions and turning those into fastbreak opportunities. Portland has also finished in the top 10 in halfcourt defensive efficiency each of the last two seasons, and it finished 10th in opponent points added per 100 plays in transition off live rebounds. One look at the personnel, and it shouldn't shock anyone that this is a team that can play elite defense. Holiday continues to be one of the best perimeter defenders in the game, and Donovan Clingan has emerged as a solid rim protector, shot-blocker, and rebounder. Can Nori continue to keep the Trail Blazers on that path while also implementing an offense that can take this team a step further?

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 41.5

DID YOU KNOW: PORTLAND WENT 7-1
OVER THE TOTAL PLAYING WITH 3+ DAYS
REST LAST SEASON



SACRAMENTO KINGS

WESTERN • PACIFIC

2025-26 Records: 22-60 SU & 36-46 ATS, 42-40 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

800-1 NBA FINALS

250-1 CONFERENCE

200-1 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 90.5 (#30 OF 30)

It seems that the youth movement is finally, mercifully on in Sacramento. Yes, there are still veterans such as Domantas Sabonis and Zach LaVine on the roster, but general manager Scott Perry clearly has injected youth into this roster. The headliner is seventh-overall pick Darius Acuff, but Alex Karaban — another first-round pick in the 2026 class — should also be considered part of the young core.

The Kings have next to zero expectations this season, so bettors can expect the kids to be in full control by the time we get to the post-trade deadline portion of the season. Can Doug Christie navigate those waters while also developing Acuff and the others into professionals? It's Sacramento, so the answer is likely "no," but there is at least some reason to be hopeful for the future.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-9.2

#28

ADJUSTED NET RATING

110.9

#26

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

120.1

#28

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

What does Acuff-ing season look like?

Acuff is a scorer. In his lone season at Arkansas, he averaged 23.5 points per game on 16.5 field goal attempts per contest. He shot 48.4% from the floor and posted a 56.1% effective field goal percentage for the Razorbacks. The dude can fill up the stat sheet. How much does that translate to the NBA, and how green will the light be for Acuff this season? The point guard spot seems to clearly be his as we enter the regular season. Malik Monk is still on this roster, but he is at his best coming off the bench. It seems that Acuff will be sharing the backcourt with LaVine. That will be a fascinating dynamic, considering LaVine averaged 19.2 points on 14 shot attempts per game last season. Between the two, who will ultimately be fed the most? One would assume the Kings want to make Acuff into a star, so he likely wins out that battle. The opportunity could be there for him from a workload standpoint to steal Rookie of the Year, for which he is 12-1 to win at DraftKings.

Which of the veterans will remain with the team after the trade deadline?

This is going to be one of the biggest questions for Sacramento and win-total bettors alike. Sabonis is under contract through the 2027-28 season, but he is an effective player who will fetch some sort of package at the trade deadline. LaVine and DeAndre Hunter are on expiring deals, with the latter set to make only \$24.9 million this season. Perry has a path set for the Kings, and that path goes through the young pieces on this roster. It would make too much sense for LaVine and Hunter to be gone once the deadline comes around, and Sabonis is a real candidate to be moved as well. If that is the case, this could be one of the youngest, most inexperienced rosters after the deadline. Under bettors will rejoice if that comes around, as the Kings will likely prioritize development over winning. Both could happen, but this team should be worse once the deadline passes.

How will the new draft lottery rules affect how Sacramento approaches the end of the season?

The Kings project to be one of the worst teams in the NBA this season. In most years, that would be a good thing for a team looking to build through the draft, but the new lottery rules make that vision a bit cloudier. Remember, the bottom three teams in the league will be placed in a "relegation zone," meaning worse odds of landing a top pick than the teams that will finish fourth through 10th. If it comes to pass that Sacramento — a team with a win total of 20.5 — is in one of those relegation spots, how will the team approach the end of the regular season? In the previous question, we approached the topic of the Kings trading off some of their veteran pieces, but will they elect to keep one, such as Sabonis, in an attempt to stave off a finish in the relegation zone? It's honestly one of the most fascinating questions of any of the teams in this guide, and it will be incredible to watch it unfold.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 21.5

DID YOU KNOW: SACRAMENTO HAD AN UGLY 7-34 SU & 18-23 ATS RECORD ON THE ROAD LAST SEASON



SAN ANTONIO SPURS

WESTERN • SOUTHWEST

2025-26 Records: 75-31 SU & 62-44 ATS, 48-58 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

+255 NBA FINALS

+160 CONFERENCE

-1100 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
103.5 (#2 OF 30)

It is rare when a player who is perceived to be generational exceeds expectations, but that is exactly what we are getting with Victor Wembanyama. The French big man has delivered on the statistical projections every scout had for him, but last season he added winning to the resume.

With Wembanyama at the helm, the Spurs surprised many by not only winning 62 games in the regular season, but also by representing the Western Conference in the NBA Finals. The only things left to achieve for Wembanyama and San Antonio are winning a championship and, perhaps, an MVP. The Spurs are rolling it back with a young core, and why not? Will the run to the Finals steel them for another, or will it take its toll and cause a regression for a young team not used to playing so much physical basketball?

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

8.0
#2

ADJUSTED NET RATING

118.8
#3

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

110.8
#3

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is this finally the MVP season for Wembanyama?

Outside of a Finals title, this is the only other achievement left for Wembanyama. Wembanyama finished third in MVP voting last season behind Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Nikola Jokic. He received just five first-place votes and did not come close to the award. This was despite averaging 25 points, 11.5 rebounds, and 3.1 blocks while leading the Spurs to the second seed in the Western Conference. Wembanyama has improved his scoring output every season in the league, and his efficiency jumped to 51.2% from the floor this last season. He has every indicator of an MVP, except for his workload. The former top overall pick played in just 64 games and averaged 29.2 minutes per contest. That will not be enough to win MVP over the likes of Gilgeous-Alexander and Jokic. After a deep run to the NBA Finals, will the Spurs elect to be cautious with his workload once again, or will they increase his minutes total and thrust him into contention for the highest individual honor the league offers?

How do the backcourt minutes between De'Aaron Fox and Dylan Harper shake out?

Harper was a revelation for San Antonio in the postseason. After a strong rookie year in which Harper averaged 11.8 points, 3.4 rebounds, and 3.9 assists per game on 50.5% shooting, the rookie took his play to another level. He averaged 14.1 points and 5.6 rebounds in the run to the Finals and shot 51.5%. Harper improved the Spurs' offensive efficiency by 2.1 points per 100 possessions on the floor last season. He is clearly due for a bump in playing time, but will it come at Fox's cost? Fox's play in the postseason declined last year. He averaged only 15.6 points on 41.4% shooting. He was a non-threat from beyond the arc for San Antonio. Harper is obviously much younger and appears to show an insane amount of promise. Could we eventually see a shift in the pecking order at guard by the time the end of the season comes around?

Is Tobias Harris the missing piece for San Antonio?

Harris is a great pro, but there are few realities in which he is the final piece of a championship roster. Still, the Spurs elected to go this route in the offseason. In fact, the addition of Harris was really the only addition of the offseason for the reigning Western Conference champions. Wembanyama clearly became fatigued as the postseason dragged on, and his production suffered. In the Finals, Wembanyama shot just 41.2% from the floor, and the Spurs were desperate to find another scoring valve outside of their franchise big man. That is where Harris comes in. Even ignoring Harris' extremely strong postseason for Detroit — he averaged 18.1 points and 7.2 rebounds for the Pistons last season — he just gives San Antonio a potential scoring outlet outside of Wembanyama in crunch time.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 59.5

DID YOU KNOW: SAN ANTONIO WAS
26-10 UNDER THE TOTAL VS. EASTERN
CONFERENCE FOES LAST SEASON



TORONTO RAPTORS

EASTERN • ATLANTIC

2025-26 Records: 49-40 SU & 46-43 ATS, 38-51 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

23-1

NBA FINALS

10-1

CONFERENCE

+825

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 100 (#12 OF 30)

While the Clippers organization was being reduced to rubble because Steve Ballmer and Co. were circumventing the salary cap to pay Kawhi Leonard, the Raptors were dead set on acquiring him. Toronto sent Brandon Ingram, Grady Dick, unprotected firsts in 2031 and 2033, a 2027 pick swap, and second-round picks in 2030 and 2033 for Leonard. The Raptors then extended him for two years and \$115 million.

Toronto now has the player responsible for delivering the franchise its first NBA championship, and Leonard is back in a situation that brought out the best in him.

It's hard not to be excited about what's going on here, at least from an on-court standpoint. Scottie Barnes, a two-time All-Star and All-Defensive Second Team selection in 2026, is coming off a season in which he averaged 18.1 points, 7.5 rebounds, and 5.9 assists per game, adding 2.9 combined steals and blocks. He's the perfect running mate for Leonard, and the two of them, along with Collin Murray-Boyles, should make up the best defensive trio in the entire league.

If there's a question mark with this team, it's in the backcourt. Immanuel Quickley and RJ Barrett will start at the guard spots. Both have been good throughout their careers, but the Raptors are hoping to win a championship, and we'll see if those two can level up. I believe in Barrett, but Quickley has a lot to prove this year.

You can also poke holes in the center spot, where Jakob Poeltl will start. Poeltl knows his role, though, and Toronto will likely finish games with him on the bench. He's more of a rotation piece than a true starter, and the Raptors have plenty of quality players in that rotation. Jamal Shae is a tremendous backup point guard, and Ja'Kobe Walter came on strong as a two-way contributor at shooting guard. Veteran Kyle Anderson and rookie Allen Graves should also have chances to make things happen.

Let's also not forget the head coach. Darko Rajakovic is the best coach that nobody talks about. He has installed a defensive system that opponents hate going up against, and now, with Leonard in the mix, we'll see what he can do with the X's and O's on offense.

If Leonard can find a way to stay healthy, this might be the toughest out in the Eastern Conference. The Raptors are elite defensively, they have shot-making, and winning at Scotiabank Arena is wildly difficult.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

2.4

#11

ADJUSTED NET RATING

114.9

#15

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

112.4

#6

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Will reuniting with the Raptors medical staff keep Leonard fresh come the postseason?

Leonard is 35 now, so there's a big difference between the body this medical staff is working with and the one it had in 2018-19. Still, the Raptors managed him to perfection that year. He was coming off a season in which he played only nine games for the Spurs because of persistent pain in his right quadriceps. Toronto got 60 regular-season games out of the two-time Finals MVP, and he was at his very best in the postseason.

This year, the Raptors will surely look for opportunities to sit him, because having him healthy in the postseason is the single most important thing for this franchise.

I imagine Toronto will do well in keeping Leonard comfortable. That's precisely why I'd skip the Over on their win total and go right to more ambitious futures, like winning the East or the NBA Finals.

Is Quickley good enough to run the show for a team with championship aspirations?

I mentioned earlier that I think Barrett will be fine this year. He has turned into a solid catch-and-shoot option, he's aggressive attacking downhill, and he plays very hard defensively. Quickley, however, will likely be the weakest link for the Raptors.

Quickley has proven himself a good off-the-dribble shooter and a solid playmaker. But he's a bit undersized, he's not great inside the three-point line, and he's always hurt.

He needs to be a little more efficient offensively, and he has to find a way to stay on the floor. If he can't, we could see a lot more of Shae than expected.

How good will Murray-Boyles be in Year 2?

Toronto clearly has two absolute studs in Leonard and Barnes, but Murray-Boyles could make this a Big Three sooner rather than later.

After last year's All-Star break, he averaged 10.4 points, 5.1 rebounds, 1.1 blocks, and 0.9 steals per game. He's a highly efficient offensive player who doesn't need touches to impact the game, and he's as good a young defender as there is in the NBA.

If things go as planned, Murray-Boyles will win over a lot of people come playoff time. And if his jumper ever becomes a reliable part of his arsenal, he's going to make a fortune in this league.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 46.5

DID YOU KNOW: TORONTO HAD A 51-38 UNDER THE TOTAL RECORD IN THE '25-26 SEASON



UTAH JAZZ

WESTERN • NORTHWEST

2025-26 Records: 22-60 SU & 41-41 ATS, 49-33 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

175-1 NBA FINALS

80-1 CONFERENCE

72-1 DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 97 (#20 OF 30)

How many times does a team that finished tied for the worst record in its conference find itself as a dark horse contender the following season? It has not happened often, but that is the reality in which the Utah Jazz find themselves this season.

Utah finally received some lottery luck in the summer, and with the second-overall pick it elected to take Darryn Peterson out of Kansas. That selection followed a busy trade deadline the season prior, in which the team elected to acquire Jaren Jackson Jr. from the Memphis Grizzlies. Walker Kessler might have been shipped off to Los Angeles, but what remains in the Beehive State is a team with versatile personnel that has the potential to surprise many in a jam-packed Western Conference.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-7.6
#27

ADJUSTED NET RATING

113.1
#22

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

120.6
#29

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Can this backcourt become one of the best in the Western Conference?

It is an extremely lofty goal for Utah's guards to achieve the status of "best" in the Western Conference, but the blueprint is there. Keyonte George — who just signed a five-year, \$157.5 million rookie contract extension in September — is coming off an incredible season. George was a breakout star for Utah last season. He averaged 23.6 points and 6.1 assists while shooting 45.6% from the floor and 37.1% from deep — all of which were career highs. Peterson plugs in perfectly next to him at the second guard spot. The former Jayhawk provides the Jazz with size in the backcourt — Peterson is 6-foot-5, 200 pounds — and his versatility and ability to play off ball will complement George. It should be noted that the Jazz boast more than those two, though. Remember, Ace Bailey remains on this roster. Bailey averaged 13.8 points and 4.2 rebounds in his rookie season and showed real growth as the season went along. Post-All-Star break, Bailey upped his scoring to 18.3 points per game and improved his rebound (4.9) and assist (2.0) averages. This trio — along with Isaiah Collier and Brice Sensabaugh — gives Utah a backcourt with some insane upside.

Should we be talking more about Bailey?

As previously mentioned, Bailey came on really strong to end the season. Overall, his season was very rookie-coded. The Jazz were outscored by 5.9 more points per 100 possessions with him on the floor, and he finished in the 18th percentile at his position in points per 100 shot attempts. But the youngster really improved as the year went along. Very quietly, he thrived as an offensive rebounder. Bailey finished in the 80th percentile in offensive rebounding rate (5.2%), and when he was on the floor, the Jazz put up 1.9 more points per 100 missed shot attempts. In all of the noise of the offseason that was extremely busy for Utah, it should not be forgotten that the team has a talent it selected fifth overall in last year's draft who shot 51.7% on two-point attempts and 36.0% from deep over his final 21 games of the regular season.

Will the versatile size that Utah boasts bother foes in the West?

Utah is an extremely large team. The Jazz's projected starting frontcourt of Jusuf Nurkic, Jackson Jr., and Lauri Markkanen all stand at 6-foot-10 or taller. Will Hardy can play Bailey — 6-foot-9 — alongside them with Peterson at the point in certain lineups. That is a lineup with four players over 6-foot-9, and all five can space the floor. Even Nurkic must at the very least be respected from the perimeter, coming off a season in which he shot 23-of-67 from above the break. The loss of Kessler is a blow to the potential of this group. Kessler would have potentially provided elite rim protection, and his trade means the center rotation will be Nurkic and Jaxson Hayes, which is very thin. But Jackson can play some minutes at the five, and his ability to space the floor will cause issues for opposing defenses. This size and spacing is one of the Jazz's biggest strengths, and it is why many believe they can be a dark horse in the Western Conference.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 36.5

DID YOU KNOW: UTAH WAS A BIG TIME
OVER THE TOTAL TEAM AT HOME LAST
SEASON, 28-13



WASHINGTON WIZARDS

EASTERN • SOUTHEAST

2025-26 Records: 17-65 SU & 33-49 ATS, 47-35 O-U

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

150-1

NBA FINALS

70-1

CONFERENCE

14-1

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING
95.5 (#22 OF 30)

The Wizards have something exciting to show for a league-worst 17-65 season. Washington landed the No. 1 overall pick in the 2026 NBA Draft and used it on BYU wing AJ Dybantsa. Last year, Dybantsa averaged 25.5 points, 6.8 rebounds, and 3.7 assists per game for the Cougars, and his ideal size and advanced skill set should make him an instant-impact player.

The Wizards will also have Trae Young and Anthony Davis to start the year. Young played a little for Washington last year, but it'll feel like the Wizards are debuting two new All-Stars.

It'll be interesting to see how all of the new acquisitions mesh with the existing young core, but it's hard not to be excited about what it could look like. Washington has been awful for quite some time, but Alex Sarr, Kyshawn George, Tre Johnson, Bilal Coulibaly, Will Riley, and Bub Carrington all have potential.

Honestly, the idea of Davis and Sarr playing together is super interesting, as both defend extremely well. Lineups with Coulibaly, Davis, and Sarr could be very difficult to score against.

This team just has to do something that's easier said than done: learn how to win. The Wizards have been very weak defensively, they're not used to sacrificing on offense, and I'm not sure they've ever played with the common goal of playing good team basketball.

I mentioned it in the Draft Lottery feature earlier in the guide, but Carrington recently said it was "no secret" that Washington was tanking for Dybantsa. Well, the Wizards enter this year with a win total of 35.5 in some places, and veterans like Young and Davis aren't there to miss the playoffs. Washington is loaded with talent, but let's see how the group handles expectations.

I think they'll do just fine, and I believe they can be a Play-In team.

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

-11.3
#30

ADJUSTED NET RATING

110.1
#29

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

121.4
#30

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

Is Brian Keefe the right guy for the job?

Keefe is 43-160 in his three years with the Wizards. I'm extremely surprised Washington kept him around, but I understand the front office felt he deserved a chance to win with a normal roster.

Still, Keefe enters this year with the hottest seat in coaching. The Wizards put together a playoff-caliber depth chart, and it's his job to do something with it.

His big test will be scraping together a competent defense. He's considered a defensive-minded coach, but Washington was 30th in the NBA in Adjusted Defensive Rating (121.4) last season. Finishing anywhere near the bottom five again would be unacceptable if Davis and Sarr can stay healthy. Keefe will also need buy-in from some of the guards, who haven't shown much interest in competing defensively.

Perhaps I'm wrong about Keefe, who is well-respected around the league. But I haven't seen much from him, and this would be a popular job if it were to come available.

How will Dybantsa operate with the smallest on-ball role he has ever had?

Dybantsa is pretty flawless as an offensive prospect. He's quick and explosive for a player his size, he has excellent footwork, and he's polished in every aspect of the game. His lone weakness right now is that his jumper is lagging behind the rest of his game. Still, there's a good chance he's in the mix for Rookie of the Year, and it isn't hard to imagine him giving Washington 15+ from the jump.

The question is how he settles in next to Young. Last year, Dybantsa had a Usage Rate of 33.5% at BYU, a top-10 mark in all of college basketball, and he obviously had the ball in his hands a ton in high school. In D.C., Keefe will look to get him involved, but he's not going to be the first option. That means Dybantsa will need to make a bigger impact off the ball. It'll also be important that he digs in defensively, which he didn't always do in Provo.

Dybantsa will have his opportunities to show out, but he also needs to fit in if Washington is going to achieve its goals.

Can Young and Davis turn the clock back a little?

From an age perspective, Young is still in his prime. However, he was more productive earlier in his career, and he has struggled to stay on the floor recently. The Wizards need him to shoot the three-ball well, make plays without hijacking the offense, move a little more off the ball, and at least pretend to care on defense. Young used to be a player whose presence meant a top-five Adjusted Offensive Rating for a team. Washington needs him to get back to that, but not at the expense of the younger players getting chances.

With Davis, it's just a matter of health. At 33 years old, he isn't the player he once was, but he's still a two-way force when healthy. The problem is that he has played fewer than 60 games in six of the last seven seasons. The Wizards need him to buck that trend, and fortunately for them, Davis needs to as well. He's playing for a contract, and improved availability will allow him to cash in.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 33.5

DID YOU KNOW: WASHINGTON WAS
11-54 SU & 24-41 ATS IN SHORTER REST
SCENARIOS (0 OR 1 DAY) LAST SEASON

TAKE **VSIN** WITH YOU
WHEREVER YOU ARE!

SiriusXM
CHANNEL 189



Roku TV



VSIN.COM

