



VSiN

2023 NBA BETTING GUIDE



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- HOW TO BUILD AN NBA MODEL
- 30 TEAM PREVIEWS
- LIVE BETTING STRATEGIES
- NBA ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

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Hello VSiN Subscribers,

It feels like we've been sending out a lot of these betting guides and welcome letters of late, but we all know how busy this time of year is and you've put your responsibility and trust in us to set you on the right course with the start of each new season.

With that, I bring to you our 2023-24 NBA Betting Guide. This year's Guide is jam-packed with the writings of Jonathan Von Tobel, Zachary Cohen, and Kelley Bydlon. Matt Youmans, Wes Reynolds, and Matt Brown also shared some of their favorite season-long props for the upcoming year in the Association.

Our main man JVT supplied 25 of the 30 team previews, with an assist from Zach on the Southeast Division. The Jon Von Model: NBA Edition is another addition to this year's Guide, along with some of Jon's futures bets to consider. Zach, our resident jack-of-all-trades, also contributed some Player Prop Betting Strategies, as well as a look at the NBA Rookie of the Year race and why you may want to look outside Victor Wembanyama for the award.

You've heard Kelley a lot as Gill Alexander's producer on *A Numbers Game*, as the co-host of *Hardwood Handicappers*, and as a weekend fill-in, but now you can read him in print for the first time with his Live Betting Strategies and an examination of why you should consider Alternate Win Total Lines.

Every good team needs a Big Three and JVT, Zach, and Kelley have been ours for this Guide and will be throughout the season, as you'll get plenty of best bets at VSiN.com from JVT and Zach on a daily basis throughout the season and continue to hear more from Kelley as we expand our NBA coverage and give the sport more of the focus and attention it deserves.

As always, we greatly appreciate your support and thank you for being a VSiN subscriber.

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VSIN EXPERT FUTURE AND PROP

BEST BETS

ZACH COHEN

Orlando Magic Alt Win Total - Over 40.5 Wins (+195)

I ended up writing the Southeast Division for this guide, so you'll see why I'm extremely high on the Magic. But the TLDR (too long, didn't read) version is that Orlando played winning basketball after a miserable 5-20 start to last season. The team's young stars, Paolo Banchero and Franz Wagner, had the summer to mature, with both of them playing for their respective national teams in the FIBA World Cup. I'm expecting this to be one of the best young duos in the entire NBA this season, and I think Orlando has better complementary pieces than you might think. Markelle Fultz has gotten better and better since a bizarre start to his NBA career, and Wendell Carter Jr. is one of the most underappreciated bigs in the league.

The Magic also have a good amount of depth with rookies Anthony Black and Jett Howard expected to factor into the rotation. They'll join guys like Jalen Suggs, Cole Anthony and Jonathan Isaac as enticing young options off the bench. Orlando also has Gary Harris and Joe Ingles as two useful veteran presences, which I think will help this year. Look for the Magic to flirt with being a top-10 defensive team this season, and don't be surprised if they make a big year-over-year improvement offensively. All of that should amount to a season in which the team plays .500 basketball, at least.

Mark Daigneault To Win Coach of the Year (+650)

Daigneault is the favorite to win this award, but I still think he's a great bet to get it done. Everybody is heading into this season expecting Oklahoma City to be one of the league's breakout teams. And I personally believe that a 45-win season is attainable for the Thunder. If Oklahoma City does reach that mark, Daigneault will likely take this thing home. This is very much a narrative-driven award, and there isn't exactly a story there for some of his biggest competitors. Adrian Griffin is second on the board, but the Milwaukee Bucks were the first seed in the Eastern Conference and added Damian Lillard in the offseason.

So, why exactly would he get the credit for the Bucks having a good season? I feel similarly about Frank Vogel, who took over an elite Phoenix Suns roster. And guys like Joe Mazzulla, Michael Malone and Taylor Jenkins have boring stories. Overall, I just think Daigneault is something of an easy call. He has all the makings of the NBA's next elite coach, and his young team is hungry.

Keyonte George To Make All-Rookie First Team (+650)

I'm not sure George will be able to do enough to win Rookie of the Year, but I like him as a dart throw to make the All-Rookie First Team. George was arguably the best player in the Las Vegas Summer League, averaging 21.7 points, 6.3 assists and 1.3 steals per game over three games for the Utah Jazz. George also did that on 52.3% shooting from the field and 44.4% shooting from 3 (on 9.0 attempts per game). George didn't look as good as people expected in his one year at Baylor, but he always had an NBA-level skill set. He's a dynamic off-the-dribble shooter, which is something that should really help him score in the NBA. And he's also good at attacking the rim, where he can either finish himself or whip the ball out to open shooters.

George also landed in a great spot, as the Jazz have minutes for the taking at the point guard position. So, whether he's a starter or a super-sub, I expect George to make his mark in the league immediately. And I love that he'll be playing for Will Hardy, who is one of the few NBA head coaches that empowers his players and allows them to play through mistakes.

MATT BROWN

Atlanta Hawks Over 42.5 Wins

In about as mediocre of a season as a team could play, the Hawks stumbled to 41 wins last year while playing some of the worst defense in all of the NBA. Quin Snyder gets a full offseason to assert some semblance of defensive awareness for this team, which has the firepower to outscore most opponents so long as the D can be just average. I actually like the team better without John Collins, to further the emphasis on Trae Young, Dejounte Murray, and to a lesser extent, De'Andre Hunter. The pickups of Patty Mills and Wesley Matthews also bring not only some depth, but some good, old-fashioned, veteran leadership. On top of this bet, I don't mind a sprinkle on the Hawks to win the Southeast Division (+210), and another sprinkle on Trae Young MVP (20-1) should they run incredibly pure this season.

KELLEY BYDLON

Nuggets Under 53.5 Wins (-110)

The Nuggets should still be one of the best teams in the Western Conference this season, but I do like the Under on their win total. They hit 53 wins a season ago, and that was with a deeper and better roster, plus they were pretty fortunate when it came to injuries.

Raptors Under 37.5 Wins (-125)

Raptors are another Under I like. They are in a crowded third tier in the Eastern Conference and I think we will see them shifting their focus more toward the future at some point this season and possibly moving players like O.G. Anunoby and/or Pascal Siakam.

Tyrese Maxey 20-1 Most Improved Player

There are a lot of quality contenders for Most Improved Player this year, but I think Tyrese Maxey deserves to be near the top of the odds board. Definitely shop around on this one, because at DraftKings he is 10-1 and second only behind Mikal Bridges. I like this bet even if James Harden plays the whole season with Philly, but LOVE it if he doesn't. Maxey's game has continued to grow every season in the league and this year he could really be relied upon offensively more than we have ever seen.

MATT YOUMANS

Milwaukee Bucks to win East (+180)

Damian Lillard ranks among the toughest competitors in the Association and he's hungry for a legitimate shot to win big in the playoffs. He gets that in Milwaukee, which won the championship two years ago. Lillard, superstar forward Giannis Antetokounmpo and a complementary supporting cast look impressive on paper. I favored the Celtics and Heat in the East in recent years, but the Bucks now rank as the best — and the DraftKings odds are the best in the market.

Houston Rockets Over 31 wins (-110)

Ime Udoka, a major upgrade as Houston's new coach, is raising expectations for a team that finished 22-60. Udoka coached Boston to the NBA Finals in 2022 and has made it clear he's focused on winning immediately. The Rockets have a good mix of veterans and young talent. Fred VanVleet will run the point and get help from Dillon Brooks, Jalen Green, Jabari Smith, rookie Cam Whitmore and others. Circa Sports offers the best number, slightly better than the 31.5 posted by DraftKings.

WES REYNOLDS

Indiana Pacers Over 37.5 Season Wins (-140)

At the midpoint of last season, the Pacers were 23-18 and looked to be a potential sleeper to make the Eastern Conference Playoffs. Then, the injuries came, and the Pacers went 12-29 in the second half to spiral to a 35-47 record. All-Star Tyrese Haliburton played just eight times after the All-Star break due to a variety of ailments. Indiana was a .500 team with Haliburton and went just 7-19 without him.

The Pacers will need to make a decision on an extension for Buddy Hield, but Bruce Brown and first-round pick Jarace Walker should help a defense that was in the bottom five in Defensive Rating and Obi Toppin

should provide more opportunities for a young, athletic team to get out more in the open floor.

Last year's first-rounder Benedict Mathurin became the first rookie to score 1,000 points off the bench since Ben Gordon in 2004-05 but struggled shooting the ball (32.7% on jump shots and only 35.1% from the field in the Summer League). That must improve for the Pacers to contend for a playoff spot. Nevertheless, having a healthy Haliburton on the floor should make this a .500 team.

JON VON TOBEL

Denver Nuggets Under 53.5 Wins (-125)

Denver's bench took a hit with the losses of Bruce Brown and Jeff Green in the offseason. The frontcourt is looking especially shaky with Zeke Nnaji and Peyton Watson penciled in as the primary reserves at center and power forward. Michael Malone will also ask more of Christian Braun, and the primary scoring option off the bench will likely be Reggie Jackson. The regular season should be spent getting some of the unproven commodities on this bench ready for what should be another deep postseason run. The regular season is where depth matters the most, and that is where Denver is weakest which should lead to a subpar record.

Sacramento Kings Under 44.5 Wins (-110)

There is no better regression candidate this season than Sacramento. The Kings got at least 73 games for their top eight players in minutes per game last season, posted a winning record in games that entered clutch time and shot just over 50.0% in clutch minutes. In other words, everything went as right as it possibly could for Sacramento. The front office decided to roll it back this season, which anyone would do, but it would be foolish to assume the same luck this time around. Factor in a Western Conference which is better than last season and it comes out to the Kings taking a step back.

Toronto Raptors Under 36.5 Wins (-120)

For yet another season Toronto will be the focus of the NBA world around the trade deadline. Pascal Siakam is on an expiring deal, and OG Anunoby has a player option that he will surely decline to make more money on the open market. The Raptors already lost Fred VanVleet for nothing this past offseason, and it would make little sense to risk similarly losing both Anunoby and Siakam when the team can get such a large return. This is a bet that the front office will ship off both and start to rebuild around Scottie Barnes.

Phoenix Suns To Win No. 1 Western Conference Seed (+340)

Phoenix did a brilliant job in the offseason, filling out its roster with minimum contracts and players who fit their needs. The front office made a good offseason even better when it got involved in the trade for Damian Lillard and acquired more depth and replaced Deandre Ayton with Jusuf Nurkic. Their core of Kevin Durant, Bradley Beal and Devin Booker fit together perfectly, and they have a legitimate MVP candidate in Booker. This team is built for the regular season, and there is value in betting on them to win the top seed in the Western Conference.

Devin Booker To Win MVP (+1800)

In 2021-2022, Booker finished fourth in MVP voting, but last season, he played in only 53 games and was all but eliminated from consideration. Still, he has been in the conversation for this award the last few seasons, and this year is finally setting up for him to break through. I believe Booker will take on the role of point guard for Phoenix this season. When he played point guard last season in a very small sample size, the Suns outscored opponents by 17.4 points per 100 possessions. His passing has improved almost every year, and he has a sturdier health history than Durant and Beal. If Phoenix is to win the top seed in the Western Conference, it will be behind an amazing season from Booker.

Atlanta Hawks To Win Southeast Division (+210)

The Hawks Homies — myself, Matt Brown and Kelley Bydlon — will fly this season! Last year, this was a bet as well, but Atlanta fell short in the division before dismantling Miami — the team it lost the division to — in the Play-In Tournament. Quin Snyder will now get a full offseason to install his system, and by all accounts, both Trae Young and Dejounte Murray are bought in. Miami got worse in the offseason after winning only 40 games last season. The gap between the division favorite Heat (-180 to win the Southeast) and the Hawks is not that large. Frankly, it would be a failure if Atlanta did not win the division this season.

IN-POCKET TICKETS TO GRAB NOW

By Jonathan Von Tobel

DeMar DeRozan took a screen from Coby White and went right to the top of the key in Miami. It was 87-87 with 3:50 left to go in the fourth quarter of the second round of the Eastern Conference Play-In Tournament. DeRozan drew both Tyler Herro and Jimmy Butler, so he swung his arms over to his left and threw a bounce pass to White who was alone on the left wing. White took the pass and lifted up with no hesitation and nailed a 3-point shot to give Chicago a 3-point lead with 3:47 left to play.

At that moment, Miami seemed to be on its way to elimination. The Heat had led by double-digits multiple times in that game, but the Bulls had responded and pushed their opponent to the brink at home. If I had told you that second that Miami would not only come back to win that game with a 12-1 run but would also go on to represent the Eastern Conference in the NBA Finals, you would have called me crazy. That is exactly what transpired though, and in Miami's journey to the NBA Finals last season, we can take a lesson when it comes to betting futures in the NBA.

The Heat's run to the NBA Finals is an extreme example, but it shows how beneficial it is to execute patience when it comes to betting futures in the NBA.

Miami was a consensus 125-1 longshot to win the NBA Finals when it snuck its way into the NBA postseason. Many, including myself, can poke holes into the run itself, but the Heat's berth in the Finals continued a run of longshots making their way to the doorstep of the NBA's ultimate goal.

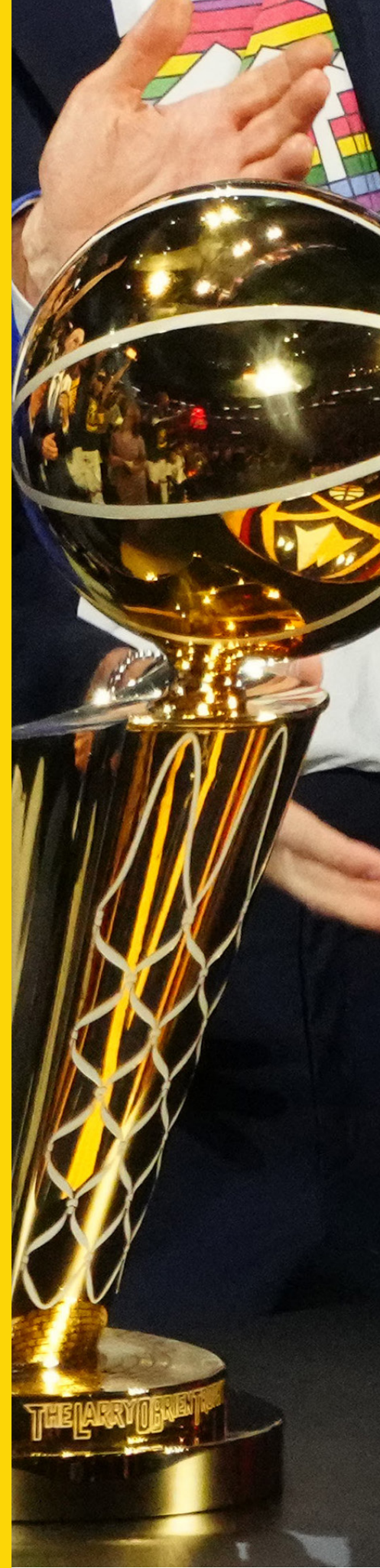
Last season, it was Miami. The season prior, Boston bottomed out at 66-1 to win the NBA Finals and eventually won the Eastern Conference. The Phoenix Suns were as low as 40-1 during the 2020-2021 season in which it made it to the NBA Finals. When Miami made its previous run in the Orlando bubble, they were 80-1 in December of that season.

You can see the theme developing here.

The NBA season is long, and the futures market adjusts as teams perform throughout the season. It is nearly impossible to keep up a consistent winning pace over an 82-game schedule, which is why it is beneficial for bettors to refrain from investing in NBA futures before the season begins. As long as bettors keep track of the futures market throughout the season, they will be able to pick off outliers in the market on teams going through issues in the regular season.

It's an exercise that I practice each year, and it has led to some fantastic futures tickets that gave me the opportunity to lock in a profit.

But, some want a ticket to have in their pocket once the season begins. Should you be a bettor who feels it necessary to have a bet on a team to win the NBA Finals, here are three recommendations for you. Last season, the Denver Nuggets were included in this column, so here's hoping we have the same success.



PHOENIX SUNS (+650 DRAFTKINGS)



This is the shortest future worth investing in before the season begins, but it is worth it if Phoenix is what I project them to be. The front office did as well as it possibly could building up the depth for such a top-heavy team, and that got even better when the Suns got involved with the Damian Lillard trade and came away with Jusuf Nurkic, Nassir Little, Grayson Allen and Keon Johnson.

Devin Booker has a sturdier injury history than his cohorts, and he is going to be an MVP candidate this season. This will be the best offense in the league, and if Durant actually stays healthy this team will be a contender for the top seed in the Western Conference. Futures like this are worth investing in if you believe this team will be as advertised and never slip past the top three seeds in their respective conference, and that is exactly what Phoenix can be this season.

LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS (18-1 DRAFTKINGS)



Yes, for the second straight season, the Los Angeles Clippers will be included in this column, but there is a massive difference this season despite the team running back the same roster as last season: the betting market has given up. This is the ultimate buy-low opportunity on one of the most talented teams in the NBA.

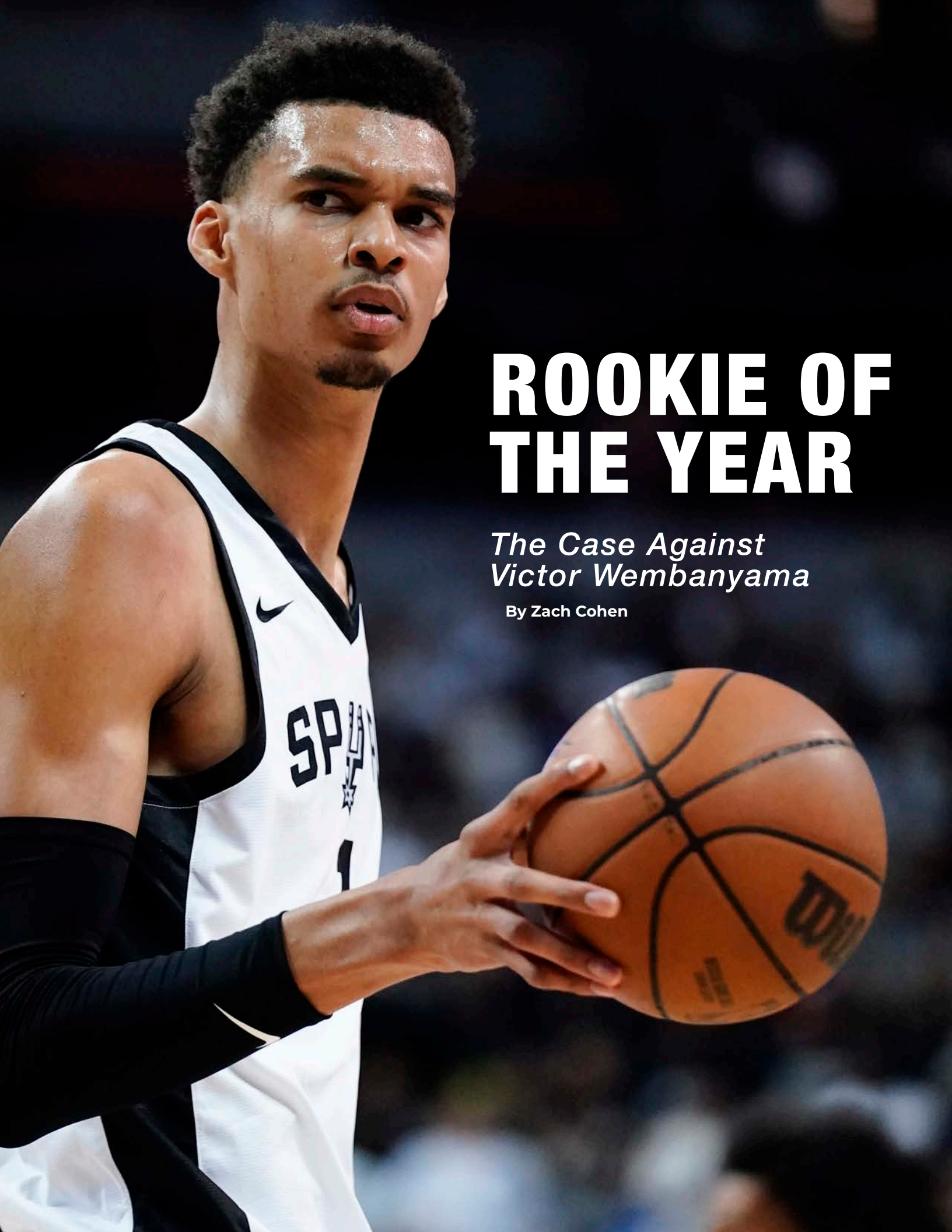
The same team that the market made +750 to win the NBA Finals last season now has more than twice the number attached to it. You can't blame the betting market for being out on Los Angeles. The Clippers season can only be ruined by injury so many times before people give up hope, but what if the team is actually healthy? Kawhi Leonard led this team to a Game 1 win over Phoenix in the first round before a knee injury sidelined him. The potential has always been there, and bettors might want to be on the train for the season when it finally leaves the station.

CLEVELAND CAVALIERS (30-1 DRAFTKINGS)



Last season, not many believed the additions of Bruce Brown and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope would make the Denver Nuggets championship contenders, but here we are. What Cleveland did in the offseason in adding Max Strus and Georges Niang reminds me of those moves that made Denver into eventual champions.

The Cavaliers struggled with spacing and shooting last season, and it was their downfall in the first-round series loss to the Knicks. Cleveland's front office addressed those issues with two good shooters who can play the small forward position, filling this roster's biggest hole. Those additions also push the likes of Isaac Okoro to the bench, making this a deeper team than it was a season ago. Milwaukee and Boston are better this season, but so too is Cleveland.



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

The Case Against Victor Wembanyama

By Zach Cohen

The hype surrounding Victor Wembanyama, the first pick in the 2023 NBA Draft, is out of this world. The 7-foot-4 big man, with an eight-foot wingspan, is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing prospects to enter the league in quite some time. The 19-year-old has legitimate perimeter skills and a unique ability to move at his size. And Wembanyama has already proven a lot early in his career, as he was a high-level contributor for Metropolitans 92, which plays in the best league in France. Last year, Wembanyama averaged 20.9 points, 10.3 rebounds and 3.0 blocks per game in 44 games. That type of production is hard to ignore in a league with grown men.

I'm not going to sit here and tell you that Wembanyama will be a bust, as I simply don't believe that. I think he's going to be a two-way terror for as long as he plays in the NBA — and I do see the path toward him having a Hall-of-Fame-level career. However, I do think he'll mostly impact games on the defensive end early on. The shot blocking and ability to contest shots should translate immediately. But I think it could take him some time to get comfortable offensively, especially with his jumper being a little overrated at this point in his career.

Last October, Wembanyama put on a shooting clinic in an exhibition game in which his French team took on Scoot Henderson and the G League Ignite. Wembanyama hit seven 3s on his way to scoring 37 points in that one, and people were raving about some of the shots he made in that game. But Wembanyama shot just 27.2% from 3 for Metropolitans 92 last season, and he shot below 30.0% in all four of his seasons as a professional overseas. That's a sample size that is hard to ignore, which leads me to believe that he might not shoot it as well as expected early on. If he doesn't, it's going to be hard for him to score efficiently as a rookie.

I'm not quite as concerned about Wembanyama's slender frame as most. He should add weight as he spends more time around NBA coaches and trainers. But early on, he might get pushed off his spots a bit. We saw a little of that in Summer League, where Wembanyama played two games and struggled mightily in one of them. The French phenom played much better in that second game, but I did see enough to question how he'll earn his keep offensively as a rookie. I mostly think he'll be asked to make shots in pick-and-pop situations, and I'm not sure I trust his jumper enough for him to feast on those plays — or San Antonio's point guard play to get him good looks. The rest of his buckets will come with him as a pick-and-roll man or with him simply cleaning up around the basket. I don't think that's enough for him to be some runaway favorite to win the Rookie of the Year award, even if he is a tremendous defender from Day 1.

As of right now, Wembanyama is a +100 favorite to win Rookie of the Year at DraftKings Sportsbook. Earlier in the summer, he was as high as -225 to win. So, the market has come down a bit on him. But even at his current odds, I'd be leaning strongly towards avoiding him completely. Instead, I'd suggest backing Henderson (+250), Chet Holmgren (+300) or Brandon Miller (+1500).

With Damian Lillard no longer with the Portland Trail Blazers, there's nothing preventing Henderson from having a big rookie season. Henderson's outside shot leaves a lot to be desired. But he's a good mid-range shooter, with the quickness off the dribble to get to his spots whenever he wants. He's also built like a linebacker despite being a point guard. That helps him absorb contact on his way to the rim, where Henderson should do a good job of finishing right off the bat. All in all, I think his game translates nicely to the league, and I like that Chauncey

Billups will coach him. A great point guard himself, Billups should be able to relate to Henderson and help him with his approach. That combination of skill set and opportunity gives Henderson a shot at having a great rookie year. And Henderson already thinks the game at a high level. So, I don't see him being too overwhelmed by the types of defenses he'll see — and spending two years in the G League is a big part of that.

Holmgren is another guy who looks like a great bet to win this award. And I honestly think he's the best bet to do it. Earlier in the offseason, I was a little nervous about the possibility of Holmgren being a big load management risk. After all, he missed his entire rookie season after suffering a Lisfranc injury in a Pro-Am last summer. But Holmgren looked to be 100% healthy in four Summer League games this year. He averaged 16.5 points, 9.8 rebounds and 3.5 blocks per game for the Oklahoma City Thunder this summer. And he played 29.8 minutes per game over the course of those two weeks. That was absolutely massive for Holmgren, as it shows he's not limited in any capacity right now. Holmgren was also very active on the scene over the summer, with a lot of videos of the 7-foot-1 big man surfacing — whether he was hooping or just working out.

In many ways, Holmgren offers the same things that Wembanyama does. He's a lanky big man with perimeter skills and the ability to impact the game on both ends of the floor. I think he'll immediately be one of the best rim protectors in basketball. And I think Holmgren will be a bit better than Wembanyama on the offensive end. Holmgren's jumper is a little further along than Wembanyama's right now, and he's also a tough finisher around the basket — despite being built like a stick. The latter is especially important when you factor in that Holmgren is playing for a Thunder team that should push for a spot in the playoffs this year. And his spot in the Oklahoma City rotation is solidified with the team not having a lot of depth at forward or center. That said, Holmgren is going to be putting up decent numbers for a team that should be on the national stage this year. That is going to go a long way in making him a contender to win Rookie of the Year.

I'm also still very much in on Miller, who looked awful for the Charlotte Hornets in Summer League. Miller looked lost as the focal point of the Hornets in Las Vegas, but that's not going to be his role as a rookie. Miller will be playing off the ball in an offense that should play at a fast pace. And when you take a player like Miller, who averaged 18.8 points per game and shot 38.4% on 7.5 3s per game at Alabama, and put him next to an elite distributor like LaMelo Ball, you never know what's going to happen.

I think Charlotte could be one of the more surprising teams in the Eastern Conference this year, and a free-flowing offense is a big part of that. If Miller plays roughly 30 minutes per night for the Hornets, what's preventing him from averaging something like 18 points per game? And given the NBA is an offense-driven league, wouldn't that at least put him in the conversation for Rookie of the Year? Crazier things have happened. So, I'm personally taking a flier on him at his long odds.

Overall, I'm just not buying Wembanyama to win this award. I think he'll have a brilliant career, especially considering he'll be learning from the legendary Gregg Popovich, and I'm also confident he'll impact winning immediately. But I don't think his game will be sexy enough for him to win over voters for an award like Rookie of the Year. I prefer some of his more offensive-minded counterparts. Or somebody like Holmgren, who is similar but in a better spot to shine.

Victor Wembanyama +100

Chet Holmgren +300

Cam Whitmore +2000

Jarace Walker +2500

Scoot Henderson +250

Brandon Miller +1500

Amen Thompson +2500

Sasha Vezenkov +2800

ALT WIN TOTALS PROVIDE HIDDEN VALUE

By Kelley Bydlon

The popularity of alternate win total markets has really boomed here in recent years. NFL bettors often use these bets in their preseason futures portfolio, almost solely because of how tough it is for oddsmakers to accurately predict how many wins a team will end up with at the end of a regular season. For context, last year - depending on the book - about 35% of NFL team win totals were off by three or more wins. With more books posting more alt win options (or just posting any options in the first place), this market has seen increased action with NBA bettors too. And the edge in these markets is there on the NBA side, just like it is on the NFL side.

Now, that's not meant to be disrespectful to the extremely talented oddsmakers around the country. But, things like injuries, along with in-season trades and transactions, can drastically affect a team's season over 82 games. And naturally, we get teams that will fall short of, or far surpass, preseason expectations on the court. More games, more trades, more injuries, more variance. Consequently, it's extremely difficult for oddsmakers to get close to the actual win total outcome year after year.

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

As you can see, many teams are going way Over or way Under their preseason win totals. Over three seasons, you're talking 68.9% of teams were 3+ wins better or worse than their win total, and 46.6% of teams were 5+ wins off.

Now, this doesn't mean you should just blindly bet the extreme alt win total options, but if you have conviction on a season win total bet, you should be adding an alternate win total bet as well. The bet size is up to you, but always dependent on bankroll.



Season	# Of Teams with Win Totals off by 3+ Wins	# Of Teams with Win Totals off by 5+ Wins
2022-2023	21	17
2021-2022	22	11
2020-2021	19	14

It's also important to note that given the lower margin for error, you'll want to be careful if you're betting alt Overs on a team that already has a high win total, and the same can be said for an alt Under bet on a team that already has a low total. A team can only win or lose so many games, but outside of those extremes, I'd recommend adding these for other teams. And if you're betting at a shop like DraftKings, you might get up to NINE different win total marks you can bet for each team.



Below are some win total and alt win totals bets I'd recommend based on DraftKings odds (I haven't bet all of these exactly as written below because I am a DraftKings employee, but I have bet them at similar odds at other shops).

NUGGETS
UNDER 53.5 (-105)
UNDER 50.5 (+215)

BULLS
UNDER 37.5 (-110)
UNDER 34.5 (+180)

RAPTORS
UNDER 36.5 (-120)
UNDER 32.5 (+205)

JON VON MODEL

NBA

NFL



2.0

1.0

By Jonathan Von Tobel

Those who handicap the NBA on a daily basis know how insane the grind can be. Most days are spent pouring through injury reports and news stories, trying to find out the latest on which players will and won't play. When you find the information it is hard to calculate the value of certain players outside of stars like LeBron James or Nikola Jokic.

So, during the offseason, I went on a quest to work on a solution. I was inspired by bettors I have interacted with on social media like Raheem Palmer (The Ringer) and Matt Meiselman (Value Betting) who have player-based models that can account for individual absences. It is an invaluable tool to use throughout the regular season.

Those familiar with my work on the website know that I spent the summer learning how to craft a rudimentary NFL model that I am currently using for the SuperContest. I decided to use some of those principles to work on my own player-based model for the NBA season.

Before diving into the model itself, I want to acknowledge Andrew Mack, who wrote the two books that helped me build both Jon Von Model 1.0 (NFL) and Jon Von Model 2.0 (NBA). Those who wish to get into building models should check out his books Statistical Sports Models In Excel Vols. 1 and 2 as they were resources I leaned on quite a bit in building these out.

I would like to note that much like the NFL model, this is an experiment. This model is the first attempt at a complex process, much like Jon Von Model 1.0 is for the NFL. This exercise aims to learn about model building and maintenance throughout the season, not to get rich by firing off locks. If anyone reading this piece today learned anything or was inspired to start a model themselves, then this experiment has done its job.

With that out of the way, let's dive in.

TEAM	POWER RATING
MILWAUKEE	9.515
BOSTON	8.470
PHILADELPHIA	7.851
PHOENIX	5.637
DENVER	4.792
GOLDEN STATE	4.678
CLEVELAND	4.663
NEW YORK	4.209
LA CLIPPERS	4.198
LA LAKERS	3.611
MIAMI	3.187
MINNESOTA	2.917
DALLAS	2.836
NEW ORLEANS	2.568
SACRAMENTO	2.564
OKLAHOMA CITY	2.338
MEMPHIS	2.245
CHICAGO	1.564
ATLANTA	1.292
BROOKLYN	0.711
UTAH	0.454
TORONTO	0.351
ORLANDO	-0.304
INDIANA	-0.994
WASHINGTON	-4.075
DETROIT	-4.633
PORTLAND	-4.907
HOUSTON	-5.183
SAN ANTONIO	-5.846
CHARLOTTE	-6.185



THE MODEL

Jon Von Model 2.0 is a player-based model that heavily weighs Box Plus/Minus (BPM) as a factor to give each player an individual value to a point spread. For those who do not know, BPM is a metric on Basketball Reference, and it is defined as a basketball box score-based metric that estimates a basketball player's contribution to the team when that player is on the court.

Right off the bat, I want to note that I believe BPM to be a somewhat flawed statistic to build a model on, as it uses information from the traditional box score and nothing from play-by-play or tracking data. I am using it for this model because it is a simple catch-all statistic that can at least give us numbers that are somewhat in line with the betting market. As the season progresses, I will experiment with different versions of Jon Von Model 2.0 and try to build out different models based on other stats.

A model in this format is a must for the NBA. Jon Von Model 1.0 is a team-based model that factors in the quarterback play. It is based on regression testing and finding a correlation to a team's home margin of victory. That was the initial path I went down for this model, but the results were all over the place. Correlation kept coming back well under 0.5 and the randomness of the NBA season made it clear that basing a model on teams rather than individuals would be a waste of time.

Jon Von Model 2.0 projects the percentage of minutes a player will be on the floor and assigns those players a spread value based on the BPM per minute played and expected minutes. That process gives us a player's projected value to the spread. Once that value is found for every player, they are added together to give a team an estimated power rating. The process from there is simple. Find the difference between the two teams' rating, factor in homecourt and spit out a projected spread for a game.

THE PROJECTIONS

I will post the game-by-game projections once we get closer to the NBA regular season. For the sake of this column, I figured it would be worth posting how Jon Von Model 2.0 has the teams rated overall.

Jon Von Model 2.0 is somewhat in line with the betting market with the top two teams in the NBA. The model differs because it clearly gives Milwaukee an edge on a neutral of 1.045 points. Damian Lillard and Giannis Antetokounmpo are both very strong when it comes to BPM, as is Brook Lopez, so the model is slightly higher on the Bucks as we head into the season.

Two other ratings stick out when reviewing what Jon Von Model 2.0 spits out: Philadelphia and Denver.

Joel Embiid was second last season in BPM (9.2). He is one of the most individually valuable players when you account for minutes played, and he also has a very good team around him if it is actually whole. James Harden was factored into these projections, and he finished 18th in BPM last season. Those two alone give the 76ers an extremely high rating.

Denver is rated as the fifth-best team in the NBA by Jon Von Model 2.0 despite having Nikola Jokic who led the league in BPM, but it speaks to the turnover on the Nuggets' bench. Reggie Jackson, Zeke Nnaji and Peyton Watson are all expected to play large roles for this team off the bench, and their BPM numbers have weighed down this team's rating. Christian Braun is also being rated as last year's version of himself — something I must learn to fix — which also waters down the projection. I expect their rating will improve as the BPM numbers grow for the players taking on larger roles.

One last note on these projections: There is clearly a line of demarcation between the worst teams in the NBA and the rest of the league. Indiana projects to be about 3.1 points better than Washington on a neutral court. That difference is wider than that of Washington and Charlotte, the worst team in the NBA according to Jon Von Model 2.0, which is only 2.11 points.

CONCLUSION

This is going to be an arduous journey this season. Building this model was much more challenging than building Jon Von Model 1.0 for the NFL. This is also going to be a model that I believe is going to have a much lower success rate.

The NBA is a brutal sport that has an insane amount of variance throughout the regular season. This model attempts to predict those outcomes by assigning numerical values to players through a single statistic. It will not account for scheduling situations or motivation, so there are sure to be stretches in which Jon Von Model 2.0 will take it on the chin. Still, this is a fun experiment and a learning experience that will make me, and hopefully you, better as a bettor when all is said and done.

FIVE ESSENTIAL PLAYER PROP STRATEGIES

By Zach Cohen

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

Last year, I did a daily NBA player props column for VSIN, highlighting some of my favorite props of the day. I'll be doing that again from Monday to Friday for the upcoming season, so you'll often be able to take 2-3 of my picks — and I'll even do some player spotlights in which I'll provide an in-depth dive on a player's matchup that I absolutely love. I'll also see if there are any boosts from DraftKings Sportsbook that I'd personally suggest playing. However, I know that part of the fun with betting is doing it yourself. With that in mind, I want to give you some tips on how to go about player prop betting in a smart way.

LEARN FROM THE GAME SPREAD/TOTAL

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

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Not only is pace available on the NBA's stats pages, but their advanced stats are the ultimate resource for sports bettors. It's amazing the type of information they provide for free and learning how to mine those pages can be crucial when trying to become a profitable player prop bettor. In addition to looking for the spreads and totals on a specific game, I regularly take note of where teams stand in certain advanced stat categories. For example, the Dallas Mavericks had the lowest rebound percentage in basketball last year. Knowing that helps you look to Dallas' opponents as potential Over bets on their rebound totals. The Houston Rockets also happened to have the highest turnover ratio in basketball last year. That generally means that backing the Over on steals for one of the players on the opposing team can be a smart bet. But the overall theme here is that there's a lot out there that can help you. Don't go into this blindly.

We also have a VSIN Daily Prop Analyzer that lists all the players that are playing on any given evening. It tells you what their DraftKings Sportsbook prop totals are for points, rebounds, assists and 3s made.

It also lets you know how they have performed with those totals throughout the season, and it even allows you to sort by which players have been most profitable. So, that's another thing you'll want to regularly use when betting props.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Sometimes a player's statistics don't tell the whole story. For example, a point guard might set their teammates up for great opportunities, but those guys might not be cashing in on them. That could mean that the passer's assist numbers will be a little down. But I like to find teams that are playing against weak defensive opponents and then look to the NBA's "potential assists" numbers. I think this is an even better way of approaching assist props than by looking at assists per game. It's just so important to be betting on players that consistently put their teammates in good positions to score. When combining potential assists with a weak opponent and a game in which both teams play at a fast pace, you're going to have a good chance of hitting your assist Overs. This is one of my favorite angles on the player props market. But there are also other things you do. For example, a known marksman from deep might be in the middle of a cold stretch shooting the ball, which leads to lower 3-point totals than usual. But looking at older percentages will tell you that those stretches are bound to end, which could lead to favorable prices and profitable outcomes. Looking at one-on-one matchups within a game can also be helpful. If a team has a bad defensive center taking on the assignment of guarding Nikola Jokic, what does that mean? Sure, he's the best passing big man in the NBA — and arguably the best passing big ever — but he might look to score more than usual in that situation. These are things you want to be thinking about often. Don't just look at numbers. Try to think about how a game will play out.

BE SOMEWHAT ACTIVE ON X (FORMERLY TWITTER)

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

DON'T GO OVERBOARD

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

ATTACK LIVE BETTING WITH A VENGEANCE

By Kelley Bydlon

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

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

BYDLON RULES TO LIVE BY

1 If you're entering a game without a pre-game bet and are looking to solely follow a live betting strategy you have in mind, **YOU HAVE TO BE OK WITH IT IF YOU NEVER MAKE A SINGLE BET.** I think people often force in-game bets if they enter games they're looking to live bet. You should enter each game with a specific strategy in mind and be on the lookout for the opportunities to present themselves that will offer you a good time/price to jump in live. Simply put, those opportunities you wish for will not present themselves in every game. Sometimes games just go a completely different way than you had thought, and that should be fine with you because you don't have a single dollar invested.

2 If you're not very familiar with live betting, start off by betting the absolute bare minimum or nothing at all. Track how the spread and total move throughout games. You'll want to get a feel for how spreads and totals move based off of scoring and pace. You'll also get a feel for when the live odds really start to shift away from the pregame numbers. You'll usually find this takes until at least the second quarter.

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

4 Know who you're betting against: a computer or a person. Sportsbooks will often utilize technology and computer algorithms to set live odds throughout a game. For a bettor, this is ideal. Those books will have live odds posted throughout most of the game, whereas a sportsbook that is booking the game by hand will usually only post numbers during commercial breaks, and even that may be inconsistent. Betting against a computer will not only give you more opportunities to bet, but those algos might also miss out on accounting for injuries that take place, ejections, players fouling out, etc. - all things a bettor can take advantage of. Whichever state you bet in, familiarize yourself with your live betting options from book to book.

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

LIVE BETTING STRATEGIES

- **It's all about shooting percentages.**
Even if it's a game you didn't have plans to bet, some opportunities will present themselves you just can't pass up. Let's say Team A is favored by five pre-game, and is down 12 middle of the second quarter. You check the box score and see that Team A is shooting 39% from the field and 18% from 3, while Team B is shooting 53% from the field and 47% from 3 (yes, I'm completely making up numbers for this example). Well, basketball is a game of shooting and runs, and teams can often start out very hot or cold from the field before finding their true average. In the example above, you should expect by the end of the game for Team A's shooting percentages to look much better and Team B's to look much worse, and in the second quarter you could be betting that pre-game five-point-favorite at a much better number.
- **OK, it's mostly about 3-point shooting percentages.**
That's the number you should be focused the most on. With how many 3s are shot in the NBA today (about 40% of FGA), you can often find teams with drastically different 3P percentages at different points in a game. However, these percentages usually regress to near a team's average by the end of a game. So, if you see a game with outlier shooting percentages on one side, or both, look to capitalize on it with a bet.
- **Guess what? This works for not just sides, but totals too!**
Let's say both teams start out shooting poorly from 3, OR both teams start out shooting way too hot from 3. This can lead to easy in-game bets on the Over or the Under.
- **Timing is crucial.**
OK, we've discussed what you're looking for when it comes to shooting percentages, but WHEN should you make the bet? A couple of minutes into the game, the odds won't have shifted enough off the pregame numbers, and if you wait until too late into the game, you're not going to give the team your betting on enough possessions to make up the points you need. If I'm basing my bet mainly just off shooting, I'm usually not getting involved until the second quarter has started, and I'm usually shutting it down by about midway through the third quarter. Again, you have to leave your team enough time.
- **Know when star players take that first break.**
As a season progresses, get to know when star players usually take their first rest in a game. Is it the end of the first quarter? Beginning of the second quarter? These are good to note as the season goes on and will help you make easier decisions on timing your in-game bets.
- **I like a team tonight, but man, I wish I was getting an extra couple points or laying a couple less!**
You'll often say that every week during football season with not much you can do about it. Well, in the NBA that's what I would call a pre-game lean that I'm looking to bet live. Let's say you're leaning team A, and then the game starts off with a flurry of points from team B. You could wait three minutes into the game, a timeout is called, and boom, all of a sudden you have a live number available to you that you were looking for pre-game. Yes, your team has an uphill climb ahead of them, but there are SO many more possessions left in the game.
- **We don't root for injuries, but they can often lead to betting opportunities.**
We see bettors capitalize on this often in the NBA. Whether it's an injury or a day off for a player, you'll often see big changes in the spread when that afternoon injury report comes out, and you see Kawhi Leonard is taking another game off. The books will look to quickly pull down their numbers or adjust them, and bettors try to beat them to the punch. A similar approach can be taken in-game. If a player is injured, ejected, or fouls out, it might not be reflected in the live odds immediately. This is a major opportunity for bettors.
- **Oh sweet, beautiful middles.**
These aren't for everybody, and it's not even something I dabble in as much as I used to, but there's nothing quite like the feeling of having +points with both teams and the game falling right in the sweet spot. Of course, this is not something you can do with every game, but maybe you bet a big dog pre-game that gets off to an extremely good start that you know they won't be able to maintain. Then come in with a smaller bet on the other side. You never know; you might win both. Of course, this can be applied to totals as well.
- **Live player props.**
This is a new frontier for me, and I don't have a ton of betting advice on it NOW, but it is something I'm hoping to bet more this season if the Vegas books allow me to. Just like all other live markets, it's one you should study to see how you might be able to profit from it.

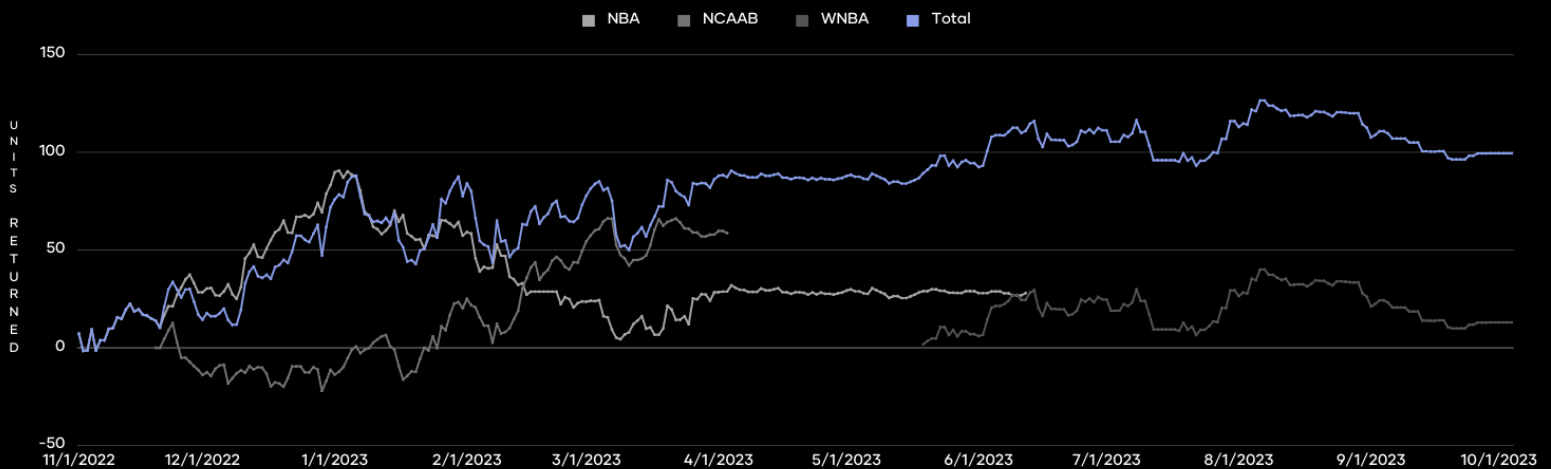




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ATLANTA Hawks

SOUTHEAST DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 44-45 SU, 38-50-1 ATS, 50-38-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
97.5 (#18 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Patty Mills
Wesley Matthews

Losses

John Collins
Aaron Holiday

NBA Draft

1 (15) Kobe Bufkin
2 (39) Mouhamed Gueye
2 (46) Seth Lundy

TEAM PREVIEW

The Hawks fired Nate McMillan last season and made the rare decision to hire outside the building in the middle of the year. But it's not often that a coach as good as Quin Snyder is available, so it made a lot of sense for Atlanta to pounce while he didn't have other options. And what Snyder was able to do in such a short time with the Hawks was very impressive.

Atlanta had an offensive rating of 114.0 before Snyder was officially brought in on February 26, 2023. That was good for the 14th-ranked offense in the NBA. But the team's offensive rating was up at 119.5 under Snyder, which was the fourth-highest mark in the league in that span. And if that was extrapolated over the course of the entire season, the Hawks would have had the highest offensive rating in the league.

With more time for Snyder to drill in some of his motion principles, Atlanta should once again be one of the best offensive teams in the league. Losing John Collins might seem like a blow on that end of the floor, but the fit was just getting stale. Atlanta now has some more lineup flexibility, and things won't be as clogged as they were when Collins was playing next to Clint Capela. A team with Trae Young and Dejounte Murray in the backcourt simply can't play with two traditional bigs on the floor at once. "Traditional" might not be a fair way to categorize Collins, but his 3-ball abandoned him last season (29.2%). The Hawks will benefit from having either a floor spacer or a better defender in his place. And they'll have it with more minutes opened up for Saddiq Bey, Onyeka Okongwu and Jalen Johnson. All three played big roles for Atlanta late in the year, and the latter two have the potential to be big-time players in the future.

Speaking of Young and Murray, Snyder will need to figure out a way to get more out of that duo. The production wasn't quite there when those two shared the floor last year. At this point in his career, Young is a lot more comfortable playing on the ball, but Murray was brought in to take pressure off the two-time All-Star. Young responded with an abysmal year as far as shooting percentages go. So, it'll be interesting to see what Snyder is able to do with the pairing. But I think he'll figure it out. His time in Utah makes it hard to doubt him.

Atlanta will need somebody else to make a year-over-year leap in order for the team to do any damage in the Eastern Conference, though. This team can obviously be counted on to make the playoffs, but is there more to the Hawks in 2023-24? That'll be determined by how much players like Johnson and AJ Griffin improve. It feels like Griffin has it in him to make a massive second-year leap, if he can stay healthy. He's an absolute sniper from deep, plus he has a little more than that to his offensive game.

It also wouldn't be all that surprising if Kobe Bufkin contributes a bit right off the bat. He can play on and off the ball, which will make him and Bogdan Bogdanovic a lethal combination off the bench. Atlanta actually had one of the more productive second units in basketball once Snyder became the team's head coach. That should be a strength again this season. And that's something to consider when betting the team's regular season win total. Having a strong bench is crucial during the regular season.

Another thing that must happen for Atlanta is that the team needs to make some sort of improvement on the defensive end. Young will never be a good defender at the point guard spot, but Snyder can at least get him to put a little more effort in. And Murray was once a plus defender in San Antonio, but he was a turnstile in Atlanta. Can the Hawks make him respectable again? That would be huge for the team, as it's really the perimeter defense that needs to be better. Atlanta has a decent amount of flexibility in the frontcourt, especially with Collins now out the door.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

This number feels way too low heading into the year. The Hawks only won 41 games last season, but the team should be a lot better with Snyder having had a full offseason to work with his roster. Atlanta won 43 games two seasons ago and the team would have easily won at least 43 games in the shortened 2020-21 season (the Hawks were 41-31 in 72 games). With that in mind, I don't see much preventing Atlanta from winning at least 43 games this year. Heading into last season, a lot of people tabbed the Hawks as a sleeper in the Eastern Conference. They never ended up living up to those expectations, but what if we were just a year early on them?

I wouldn't be surprised if Collins ends up playing well in Utah, as he's a player I do like quite a bit. But I do think he wore out his welcome in Atlanta and the team will likely be better off without him. The Hawks are also a team that should take the regular season seriously. It's hard not to when you're playing for a coach like Snyder, especially in a year in which he'll really be trying to get through to his players. The same can't be said for a lot of other teams. That on its own is a good reason to play the Over on their win total. The Hawks are going to compete on nights when opponents will be taking it easy.

Let's not forget that the Hawks were rather impressive in the postseason last year. Atlanta actually earned a 116-105 win over the Miami Heat in the Play-In Tournament, which had Erik Spoelstra's team one loss away from elimination. So, that Cinderella run for Miami was close to not happening, with Atlanta being one of the reasons. The Hawks then won two games in their series against a good Boston Celtics team, which leads me to believe that Snyder's group isn't far away from being one of the teams that competes in the East.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 42.5

Preview By
Zach Cohen



BOSTON

Celtics

ATLANTIC DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 68-34 SU, 55-46-1 ATS, 52-48-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
103.5 (#1 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Kristaps Porzingis
Jrue Holiday
Oshae Brissett

Losses

Marcus Smart
Grant Williams
Robert Williams
Malcolm Brogdon

NBA Draft

2 (38) Jordan Walsh

TEAM PREVIEW

The Boston Celtics have had the sustained success that most franchises dream of having in recent years. Boston has appeared in five of the last seven Eastern Conference Finals, and the team is currently in a run of three appearances in four seasons. However, five appearances in the conference finals have yielded just one berth in the NBA Finals and not a single championship, so the front office decided to make changes this season.

Marcus Smart and other assets were shipped off to bring in Kristaps Porzingis. Malcolm Brogdon and Robert Williams were traded to bring in Jrue Holiday. Gone too is Grant Williams, who played a pivotal role off the bench for Boston. This team will now have a true post presence on the floor and a defensive-oriented guard to replace Smart, but the cost is a bench nowhere near the level of depth this team used to have.

The fit with Porzingis is going to be fascinating for a team that did not play out of the post much last season. Boston averaged the fifth-fewest post-ups per game (3.8), and the two players who averaged more than one per game were Jayson Tatum (1.3) and Marcus Smart (1.1). Having a player like Porzingis on the floor who averaged 4.0 post-ups per game last season with Washington is going to be a change for the Celtics.

Porzingis is an efficient post player though, and the change he brings is a positive one. Last season, Washington averaged 1.18 points per possession on a Porzingis post-up. That efficiency was second to Nikola Jokic (1.22) when you account for frequency. Porzingis is also an effective roll-man in a pick-and-roll, and the Wizards averaged an identical 1.18 points per possession when he was the roll-man in a pick-and-roll last season.

Porzingis gives Boston something it did not have last season, and it will likely be a positive to have him on the floor. But, his presence does come with some questions.

Last season was a career year for Porzingis in points (23.2), field goal percentage (49.8%), assists (2.7) and steals (0.9). It is not easy to replicate career years like that, and there is something to the theory that playing on a team with no expectations is different from one with championship aspirations. It was also the most games he has played (65) since the 2016-2017 season. Can Boston count on him being available?

This team is also very small. The trade for Holiday cost their primary bench option at center in Williams. Boston's center rotation will now be Al Horford, Luke Kornet and possibly Neemias Queta. If Porzingis or Horford misses time, which is a high possibility given their injury history, this team will be hard-pressed to find minutes up front.

These are concerns worth considering because the Celtics will be one of the highest power rated teams in the NBA, as they were last season when they were favored in 90 of the 102 games played between the regular season and postseason. That rating bordered on being too high though, as the Celtics went 44-44-2 ATS in those 90 games.

With the addition of Porzingis, one has to wonder how much the team's profile changes as well.

Boston turned up its production from behind the arc up to 11 under Joe Mazzulla last season. The Celtics took 44.5% of their attempts from 3-point range and shot 37.9% overall, leading to the fourth-best non-garbage time offensive rating (118.3). Porzingis is a capable shooter without question, but he will usually attempt just over 40% of his shots from mid-range. With more frequent post-ups and an assumed bump in mid-range attempts, Boston could be a team that skews Under on its games early in the season.

Let's make one thing clear: The Celtics are going to be a very good team when healthy.

Tatum has been better almost every season, and he is coming off a brilliant season in which he averaged 30.1 points, 8.8 rebounds and 4.6 assists, all of which are career-highs. Despite a poor showing in the postseason, Jaylen Brown is one of the best secondary stars a team could ask for. They should be in competition for a top-three seed in the Eastern Conference once more. However, one could make the argument that the foundation of players with poor injury history and worse depth means this team took a step back in the offseason.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

The history of injury concerns with the core of this team's rotation will directly affect the win total for this season, but the betting market does not seem to have that factored in. Boston's original win total was 53.5, but it has since been bet up to 54.5 at DraftKings. It is very likely that Porzingis or Horford miss time this season. If that is the case, then the Celtics' depth will be tested.

Payton Pritchard is currently listed as the primary backup point guard, and Lamar Stevens and Oshae Brissett make up the depth at wing. That is a much different group than what Boston had coming off the bench last season. It makes it somewhat difficult to fully buy in on this team surpassing its win total, especially one that is as high as this one.

The factor that will push Boston beyond its win total, if it does go Over, will be its schedule. Positive Residual ranks their schedule as the third-easiest in the NBA. The Celtics have a massive rest advantage this season, as they play in 16 games with a true advantage and only 11 in which they will be at a disadvantage. With an average number of back-to-backs this season (14), Boston could benefit from being handed a manageable schedule.

Still, the potential of this team losing games to injury to a majority of their rotation looms, which means this recommendation can only go in one direction: Under.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 54.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



BROOKLYN

Nets

ATLANTIC DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 45-41 SU, 42-43-1 ATS, 38-47-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
97.0 (#19 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions
Dennis Smith Jr.

Losses
Patty Mills
Darius Bazley

NBA Draft
1 (21) Noah Clowney
1 (22) Dariq Whitehead
2 (51) Jalen Wilson

TEAM PREVIEW

The Brooklyn Nets are one of the most interesting teams in the NBA as we head into the 2023-2024 season. It has a burgeoning young star in Mikal Bridges, a roster full of talented wing pieces that any team in the league could use and a defensive center that came into his own last season in Nicolas Claxton.

These pieces should come together to form a competent basketball team, but the results with this roster down the stretch last season were disappointing. In the 27 games after the trade deadline, Brooklyn went just 12-15 SU/13-14 ATS, but the record was not as troubling as the statistical production.

In those 27 games, the Nets were 23rd in non-garbage time offensive efficiency due to averaging only 113.8 points per 100 possessions. Their lack of efficiency on that end of the floor stemmed from an inability to get to the rim and below-average efficiency from beyond the arc despite a high rate of 3-point attempts.

Brooklyn took just 29.3% of their shot attempts within four feet of the basket over that span, which was the fifth-lowest frequency of rim shots, and they shot just 62.8% on those attempts. This is despite averaging the seventh-most drives per game (51.3). The Nets lacked a true north-south threat that could get to the rim and finish, and it is likely why they passed out of drives 40.1% of the time and why only 9.4% of their assists came off drives. This is not likely to improve this season outside of natural progression from players like Bridges, as the team did not make many changes in the offseason.

This lack of pressure on the rim meant that Brooklyn relied heavily on perimeter shots. The Nets devolved into a high-frequency shooting team with low efficiency. They took 40.2% of their attempts from beyond the arc but shot just 35.7% on those attempts overall and 34.8% on non-corner attempts. The team can generate a more efficient offense if it can get to the rim more this season, and that will likely improve some of the shooting numbers as well. It should also be pointed out that better luck on their shooting — Brooklyn shot just 36.5% on wide-open looks — will also help.

This team is also small as currently constructed, and rebounding will likely be an issue. Their projected starting lineup of Spencer Dinwiddie, Bridges, Cameron Johnson, Dorian Finney-Smith and Claxton has four players under 6-foot-8. That weakness was apparent last season, as the Nets were 26th in offensive rebounding rate (23.9%) and 28th in defensive rebounding rate (70.2%) in the last 27 games. That lack of rebounding led to 14.6 second-chance points per game allowed, which killed this team defensively.

Brooklyn was worse on defense with this group than it should be. It allowed 115.8 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time which was 17th over that span. The second-chance points allowed did not help, especially in halfcourt settings. The Nets allowed 100.2 points per 100 plays in the halfcourt and 20.5 putback plays per 100 missed attempts. Those shortcomings masked what was truly an elite transition defense that allowed the fewest points added per 100 plays (0.7) and the fewest overall points per 100 plays (113.5).

Given the nature of the individual defenders on this roster — Bridges, Finney-Smith, Johnson and Claxton — this team should be better defensively than what it was last season. An emphasis on defensive rebounding would bring this team into the top half of the league's defensive standings, as their elite transition defense should be replicable this season.

When Brooklyn first acquired Bridges and the other pieces at the trade deadline last season, I thought this team would consistently play to the Under. It was a team that would likely struggle on offense but would be able to defend at a high level. The team finished the season going 15-12 to the Under, and we could see a similar style of play this season, especially if they improve their halfcourt defense.

If the defense improves and the shooting regresses to the mean, then Brooklyn should find itself in contention for the postseason, especially in an extremely weak conference outside of the five highest-rated teams.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

As previously noted, the Brooklyn Nets did deal with some form of bad luck last season, specifically on offense where it shot just 36.5% on wide-open 3-point attempts despite generating the eighth-most uncontested looks. Improved luck in that regard should mean better offensive production. If the team makes this improvement and shows better prowess on the glass, then it is reasonable to expect an improvement in record.

This version of the Nets finished 12-15 SU in the 27 games they played. According to the Cleaning The Glass data, they played to the equivalent of a 36-win team over the course of those 27 games. If we assume the statistical improvements that were discussed earlier take place, then an improvement of two or more wins can happen here. Especially if the powers at the top of the division — Boston and Philadelphia — take small steps backward this season.

Brooklyn does not have a particularly daunting schedule either. Positive Residual ranks its schedule 17th in their strength of schedule metric. The Nets have a positive net rest advantage (+2) and are tied with Portland for the third-most overall rest advantages. They do travel the second-most miles, but travel is not the task it used to be. Brooklyn might not be the flashiest team, but there are plenty of indicators this team could surpass market expectations of it this season.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 37.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



CHARLOTTE Hornets

SOUTHEAST DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 27-55 SU, 37-43-2 ATS, 34-48-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
92.0 (#28 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Frank Ntilikina

Losses

Dennis Smith Jr.

NBA Draft

1 (2) Brandon Miller
1 (27) Nick Smith Jr.
2 (31) James Nnaji
2 (41) Amari Bailey

TEAM PREVIEW

It isn't quite a free agency addition for the Hornets, but Miles Bridges will be back after he serves the final 10 games of his suspension. Bridges is two years removed from a career year, which saw him average 20.2 points, 7.0 rebounds and 3.8 assists per game on 49.1%/33.1%/80.2% shooting splits. And Bridges did all of that while providing Charlotte with a good bit of defensive versatility. And if you're trying to figure out the reason the Hornets went from a Play-In team in 2021-22 to a lottery team in 2022-23, you might as well start with Bridges' absence.

With Bridges back in the mix, playing alongside LaMelo Ball and P.J. Washington, this is a team that we need to take more seriously in 2023-24. Ball is one of the game's better offensive engines, as he averaged 23.3 points, 8.4 assists and 6.4 rebounds per game in 36 games last season. Ball has also become a much better 3-point shooter than he was as a rookie, as he shot 38.9% in his second year and then 37.6% in his third year (on 10.6 attempts per game). Ball just needs to figure out a way to lock in defensively, at least a little. His effort on that end of the floor is flat-out embarrassing. As for Washington, Charlotte brought him back on a steal of a contract, inking him to a three-year, \$46.5 million deal. Washington averaged a career-high 15.7 points per game last season, and he's a guy that can do a lot of things at the power forward spot.

If all three of those players stay healthy, it isn't outrageous to think that Charlotte can exceed expectations by quite a bit. Second-year center Mark Williams should become a reliable rim-running big man in short order, making him a perfect pick-and-roll partner for Ball. And veterans Terry Rozier and Gordon Hayward are two very reliable players, capable of playing complementary roles or shouldering the load when other key players are out.

The Hornets also had the second pick in the draft last year, when the front office opted to select Alabama wing Brandon Miller. Many people questioned the decision to pass on Scoot Henderson, but there's no denying that Miller is the better immediate fit. With Ball already on the roster, Henderson wouldn't have been able to play his natural position right away. But Miller can play alongside most of Charlotte's key pieces. Last year, Miller averaged 18.8 points and 8.2 rebounds per game for the Alabama Crimson Tide, and he shot 38.4% from 3 on 7.5 attempts per game. His jumper should translate immediately and that'll be big for the Hornets, as there is always good looks to go around in a Ball-led offense. But Miller also has a lot of wiggle to him, despite standing at a lanky 6-foot-9. He grew up idolizing Paul George and you can see a lot of the eight-time All-Star in Miller if you just squint a little.

If Miller can flush a poor Summer League performance down the drain and give Charlotte a good 25-30 minutes per game, there isn't much stopping the Hornets from getting back into the Play-In mix. I even think 27th overall pick Nick Smith Jr. can give Charlotte a little juice off the bench as a rookie. Smith never quite figured things out with the Arkansas Razorbacks last season, but he was the third-ranked player in the ESPN 100 in the 2022 class. He oozes talent as both a scorer and a playmaker. I'm also pretty high on what he'll be able to accomplish defensively. And Smith was one of the few standouts on Charlotte's Summer League team, so perhaps his game is a better fit for the NBA than it was for college. It has happened before.

All in all, there's more talent on this roster than meets the eye. And Charlotte was eighth in the league in offensive rating two years ago, when Ball and Bridges were both healthy. Last year, the Hornets were dead last in the NBA in offensive rating. I'm counting on a lot of positive regression, and I can see this being a top-15 offense in 2023-24. And with an old-school head coach like Steve Clifford at the helm, you can probably count on the Hornets being about average defensively. They were 20th in the NBA in defensive two years ago and fell to 22nd last year. But a full season with Bridges, along with some improvements from Williams in Year 2, should make things better. Even Miller is a solid defender on the wing, where he knows how to use his length to his advantage and is smart within the team concept.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Betting the Over on the Hornets is a bet on Ball staying healthy, which is a risky proposition. The talented guard played just 51 games as a rookie, bounced back to play 75 games in his second year and then played just 36 games in 2022-23. But his injury last year was extremely fluky, so I don't want to make the mistake of labeling him injury prone. And even if he plays something like 65 games this season, it's hard to see Charlotte not winning at least 32 games — especially with Rozier and Smith being good options to fill in for him off the bench. With that in mind, I'd suggest playing the Over on this.

It might be hard to just ignore what we saw out of a miserable Charlotte team last year, but this was one of the more exciting up-and-coming teams in basketball two years ago. Since then, the Hornets have only added more seasoning and more talent. And I believe that the new crop of talent fits the modern NBA style extremely well. So, I'm expecting Charlotte to bounce back and start showing some promise again.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 31.5

Preview By
Zach Cohen



CHICAGO

Bulls

CENTRAL DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 41-43 SU, 42-41-1 ATS, 37-46-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
96.5 (#20 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Jevon Carter
Torrey Craig

Losses

Patrick Beverley
Javonte Green
Derrick Jones Jr.

NBA Draft

2 (35) Julian Phillips

TEAM PREVIEW

It is unclear what the goal is for the front office of the Chicago Bulls. The top of the Eastern Conference, which was already much better than Chicago, got stronger with the additions of Damian Lillard and Jrue Holiday to Milwaukee and Boston respectively. The Bulls' offseason consisted of re-signing Nikola Vucevic and acquiring Jevon Carter and Torrey Craig. Chicago could potentially make it back to the Play-In once more, but it is hard to see this team achieving anything more than that by running it back with a roster that won just 40 games last season.

The main priority for Chicago will be fixing an offense that finished 24th in non-garbage time efficiency by averaging 113.8 points per 100 possessions. In listening to what team members are saying, it seems that 3-point shooting will be an emphasis this season. The Bulls had the second-lowest frequency of 3-point shots last season (30.4%), and they only ranked 17th in accuracy (36.2%). Their average of 10.4 made 3-pointers per game was tied for the lowest in the NBA. If the Bulls are going to maximize the potential of this season, taking more efficient shots will help, but they will need their stars to buy in.

DeMar DeRozan led the team in usage rate last season (29.5%) and likely will once again this season. However, he is a mid-range scorer who took 69.3% of his shot attempts from mid-range. He is extremely efficient from that area (he shot 46.6% on those attempts), but he only averaged 1.9 3-point attempts per game. In media availability in the offseason, he also pushed back on the idea of taking more attempts per game.

LaVine is a much more balanced scorer who shot 37.5% on 7.1 3-point attempts per game, and Patrick Williams, whose spot in the starting lineup could be on the line due to the addition of Torrey Craig, is a career 41.4% shooter. Jevon Carter has also hit 39.7% of his career 3-point attempts, and both Alex Caruso and Coby White are good enough from deep that they are considered threats by opposing teams. This team does not lack accurate shooters, but the willingness to change and take more of those attempts has to come if this offense is going to improve.

Bettors should look for this team to run more as well. Chicago finished 18th in pace (99.18) last season and played the fourth most halfcourt possessions (81.3%). It finished just 22nd in offensive rating in transition off live rebounds (118.4), so the team must improve their efficiency when running as well. Chief basketball executive Arturas Karnisovas has expressed a desire for more transition play from his team as well, which could lead to another difference in this season's team.

So, more 3-point attempts and makes, as well as a faster pace of play with more efficient transition offense could be coming for Chicago. That would mean looking for Overs in Bulls games early could benefit bettors. It could be the case, but remember that this team could be surprisingly effective on defense again this season.

The Bulls were one of the best defensive teams in the NBA last season. They allowed the fifth-fewest points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time (112.5) while ranking third in defensive rebounding rate (74.9%) and sixth in turnover rate (15.0%). Their most effective defensive lineup configuration was with Patrick Beverley and Alex Caruso on the court together. Those lineups ranked in the 98th percentile in defensive efficiency (105.8). While Beverley departed, the team did bring in Carter to replace him. He will be a good defender at the point of attack to replace Beverley with, and should Vucevic dominate the defensive glass as he did last season it won't be a shock to see this team finish as one of the best defenses yet again.

At this point, it is somewhat difficult to project accurately what Chicago will be this season. They have expressed a desire to change certain offensive philosophies, but executing that style is another task entirely. Certain teams that finished ahead of them last season (Miami and Brooklyn) could be worse this season, but teams that were behind the Bulls (Indiana and Orlando) could rise to take their place.

DraftKings currently has Chicago at +115 to participate in the Eastern Conference Play-In, and given what we know about this team there is a high probability that would be this franchise's fate this season.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

One more factor hangs over this team that will impact where it ends up in the standings: DeRozan's contract. He is on an expiring deal, and should Chicago end up on the wrong end of the standings by the time the trade deadline comes around, he will be a hot commodity for other teams to call about. If DeRozan is shipped off, it could open the door for LaVine to be dealt as well, but moving him is slightly more difficult considering the years and money left on his current deal.

The potential reality of this team not having DeRozan and LaVine on this roster on the other side of the trade deadline must enter the minds of win total bettors this season. If we assume that this roster stays intact, there are some factors that work in the Bulls' favor this season.

First and foremost, Chicago is due for some better luck. They were 15-23 SU in games that entered clutch minutes despite an even 0.0 net rating. The Bulls also had the ninth-lowest 3-point percentage on uncontested looks (37.7%) despite generating the 10th-highest frequency of wide-open shots. Better luck in those factors, coupled with a schedule that has one of the best net rest advantages (+5) and the fifth fewest miles traveled could allow the Bulls to go Over their win total. Since DeRozan is still on the roster the only thing to do is to recommend an Over play on this win total.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 37.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



CLEVELAND

Cavaliers

CENTRAL DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 52-35 SU, 44-41-2 ATS, 40-47-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
100.0 (#9 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Max Strus
Georges Niang
Ty Jerome

Losses

Robin Lopez
Dylan Windler
Cedi Osman
Damian Jones

NBA Draft

2 (49) Emoni Bates

TEAM PREVIEW

Cleveland was one of the most statistically dominant teams in the league last season. It led the league in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (111.0) and averaged the seventh-most points per 100 possessions on offense (116.7). That led to the second-best net rating in non-garbage time (+5.8) and 51 wins. However, they bowed out in the first round of the postseason due to inconsistent offense and 3-point shooting. The front office used the offseason to upgrade this roster, and while the moves are not flashy, they are exactly what this team needs to improve.

The biggest issue for Cleveland last season was its 3-point shooting. It was a slightly above-average team that shot 36.9% from beyond the arc, but it took only 33.8% of its attempts from that area of the floor. Only four players shot better than 35.6% from 3-point range. Those issues caused problems when it came to spacing for this offense and led to its downfall. That is why the additions of Max Strus and Georges Niang are massive.

Strus is a career 37.1% shooter, and while he only shot 36.1% on catch-and-shoot attempts last season, he did hit 41.3% of those attempts the year prior. He is a capable shooting threat who will benefit by playing next to Donovan Mitchell and Darius Garland. Niang is a career 40.3% shooter who shot 41.2% on catch-and-shoot attempts last season. Both can also play minutes at small forward, which is a godsend for Cleveland who had to sacrifice offense for that position last season.

Neither Strus nor Niang are lockdown defenders, so this team will sacrifice some efficiency on the defensive end of the floor. However, the team's frontcourt is so good that any sacrifice will not drop their production too far.

When Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen were on the floor together last season the Cavaliers outscored opponents by 8.6 points per 100 possessions. They did so by limiting the opposition to 110.7 points per 100 possessions, which was a defensive rating that ranked in the 88th percentile. In those minutes, Cleveland allowed 32.4% of attempts to come at the rim, and opponents shot 59.5% on those shots. As long as those two remain healthy, this team will be elite on the defensive end of the floor.

Having said that, more will be asked of Mobley on offense this season, and he will need to answer the call if Cleveland is going to step into the realm of conference contender.

Mobley averaged 16.2 points and 9.0 rebounds on 55.4% shooting last season, so on the surface he was a perfectly adequate offensive option. However, he struggled when it came to efficiency from distance. Mobley shot just 39.7% from mid-range and 21.5% from beyond the arc. The ugliest aspect of his shooting game was from the corners, where Mobley hit just 18.2% on the season. Those are numbers that have to improve.

Allen is a true center with no perimeter game whatsoever. Should Mobley continue to struggle from distance opposing teams will be able to help off of him frequently when Mitchell or Garland drive to the basket. It will make spacing a massive issue for this team, much like it was in the series loss to New York in the postseason.

If Mobley can take that next step in his offensive game, this team is primed for a jump in the standings. This bench has depth to it with Caris LeVert and Isaac Okoro, and the backend has some positive pieces like Dean Wade and Ty Jerome. Should rookie Emoni Bates build on what he showed in Summer League, this reserve unit gets even deeper.

Last offseason, there were few who turned their heads when Denver acquired Bruce Brown and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope. However, both players were integral to the championship run that the Nuggets just made. Similarly, the acquisitions of Strus and Niang can make a difference for Cleveland this season. Both players fill needs perfectly, and they join a team with a superstar already in place.

This team will also have to improve its performance on the road if it is to compete for a championship. The Cavaliers were 32-12 SU/26-18 ATS at home last season in both the regular season and postseason, but they went just 20-23 SU/17-23-2 ATS on the road. If that can improve this should be a good team to follow early on in the season, as it comes into the year as the forgotten contender in the East.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Cleveland will benefit from one of the most manageable schedules in the NBA. Positive Residual has the Cavaliers with the fifth-lowest strength of schedule this season. Cleveland has a negative net rest advantage on the schedule (-1) and 15 back-to-backs, but they do not travel many miles given the makeup of the division which is a massive advantage.

The Cavaliers can also expect to be much better on the offensive end of the floor with better shooting personnel, so we can assume a team that finished seventh in offense last season will take a step forward on that end of the floor. They will likely slip defensively because it is hard to lead the league in defensive efficiency in consecutive seasons, but this will still be one of the best defensive teams as long as the frontcourt is healthy.

At the very least, Cleveland has the look of a strong regular-season team. They have a distinct homecourt advantage, and they have a defense that is driven by strong frontcourt play. Once the Cavaliers get to the postseason, there will be different questions to answer, but in the regular season, this team will compete for a top-four seed or better again.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 49.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



DALLAS

Mavericks

SOUTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 38-44 SU, 30-49-3 ATS, 44-38-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

99.0 (#13 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions	Losses
Grant Williams	Justin Holiday
Seth Curry	Frank Ntilikina
Dante Exum	Christian Wood
Richaun Holmes	Markieff Morris
	Reggie Bullock
	Davis Bertans

NBA Draft

1 (12) Dereck Lively
1 (24) Olivier-Maxence Prosper

TEAM PREVIEW

The season fell apart for Dallas after it acquired Kyrie Irving at the trade deadline. The Mavericks finished the season 9-18 SU/10-16-1 ATS and were outscored by 1.3 points every 100 possessions. It should not surprise those reading this that the issue that plagued Dallas over the final 27 games was a defense that was the sixth worst over that span (119.4).

The easy thing to do for the masses was to point the finger at Irving, but it was a complete failure by the Mavericks organization that led to the franchise missing a berth in the Play-In Tournament. Some wanted this duo blown up before it had the chance to really find its footing, but the front office did right in not only retaining Irving but also bringing in pieces that can work well with their star duo.

But first, let's chat about that star duo.

There is no denying how good Doncic and Irving can be on offense when they share the floor. According to Cleaning The Glass, the Mavericks averaged 121.7 points per 100 possessions when those two were on the floor together. They were dominant in halfcourt settings at an average of 111.0 points per 100 plays, and those lineups ranked in the 92nd percentile or better in all three major shooting categories. These statistics should not come as a surprise considering these two are insanely talented scorers, but this offense can get better this season.

Outside of simple plays - like Irving coming off a screen or transition opportunities - there was not much synergy between these two on offense. Their play would devolve into a simple 'your turn, my turn' style of play with the one that did not have the ball standing in the corner while the other did their thing. More time together in the offseason will allow them to figure out how to play with one another, so bettors can expect a more lethal offensive team this season.

With that in mind, this team will likely struggle on defense with those two on the floor. In the possessions with Irving and Doncic together, they ranked in the 94th percentile of offensive efficiency, but they only outscored opponents by 4.6 points per 100 possessions due to their 117.1 defensive rating in those minutes. That's not to say that Dallas is devoid of defensive talent though.

Josh Green has emerged as a legitimate on-ball defender, and the numbers support that. He has improved the Mavericks' defensive efficiency each season in the NBA, and last season he posted a career-high +4.2 efficiency differential while also playing a career-best in minutes. Green has also vastly improved as a catch-and-shoot threat, going from just 17.4% on those attempts in his rookie season to 41.3% last season.

The front office also hit it out of the park in free agency by adding Grant Williams. Williams is a versatile defender who can guard every position on the floor if needed. He can also function as a small-ball five if needed — Boston had a +3.3 net rating when he played center last season — and he connected on 38.6% of his catch-and-shoot opportunities from deep, meaning he fits well next to Doncic and Irving.

Dallas also has some great depth on this roster. Jaden Hardy showed real potential in his rookie season, they added Seth Curry as another off-ball shooting threat to pair with their ball-dominant stars, and they still have Tim Hardaway Jr. on this roster. Their frontcourt depth is not rife with rim protectors, but Dwight Powell and Maxi Kleber remain at the position.

It will be fascinating to see how this team plays this season. Irving brought their pace up from 96.03 to 99.08 when he joined the team, and with the possessions in which he was on the floor without Doncic, the Mavericks played less frequently in the halfcourt, but not by much. This will be a halfcourt-oriented team that plays average defense with elite offense. It makes them a fascinating team to gauge from a totals perspective.

What makes them more fascinating is the wide variety of outcomes that this season could have. A finish as a top-three seed in the Western Conference, an unceremonious elimination in the Play-In Tournament, and everything in between is realistic for a team like this.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Positive Residual gives Dallas the 10th highest strength of schedule this season. The Mavericks have more games in which they are at a rest disadvantage (10) than those in which they have the advantage (9), and those nine games are on the lower end of the scale regarding overall advantages. Still, there are positives to find with the schedule.

The Mavericks only have 13 back-to-backs this season, and they are in the bottom half of the standings when it comes to total miles traveled this season. The team gets the benefit of playing in a division that could be considered the worst in the Western Conference, and that is buoyed by the suspension of Ja Morant, as Dallas will face Memphis three times before he serves his 25-game ban.

There is also the wild card that is Kyrie Irving. Since the 2019-2020 season Irving has played in only 163 games, and quite a few of those absences are due to personal choice as opposed to injury. At any moment he could decide that Dallas is not for him, and that would throw this team into chaos. This team does have potential though, should Irving be available. The potential is too great to ignore, especially given the state of the division this team resides in.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 45.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



DENVER Nuggets

NORTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 69-33 SU, 55-46-1 ATS, 46-54-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
103.5 (#2 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Justin Holiday
Jay Huff

Losses

Bruce Brown
Jeff Green
Thomas Bryant
Jack White

NBA Draft

1 (29) Julian Strawther
2 (32) Jalen Pickett
2 (37) Hunter Tyson

TEAM PREVIEW

The reigning champions head into the 2023-2024 regular season in a great position to repeat as champions. There are some changes to the depth of this roster, but the best starting lineup in the NBA returns, and with a perennial MVP on the floor in Nikola Jokic the Nuggets are primed to make another run at a championship.

Last season, when Denver had Jamal Murray, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Michael Porter Jr., Aaron Gordon and Nikola Jokic on the floor, the Nuggets outscored opponents by 12.7 points every 100 possessions. That net rating was the best among lineups that played at least 1,000 possessions together, according to Cleaning The Glass. In the postseason that crew posted a +10.0 net rating and averaged 121.0 points per 100 possessions.

That starting lineup will be among the best in the NBA again this season, so it is safe to assume that Denver will compete again for a top seed in the Western Conference. However, the changes to this team - while minimal - could have a massive impact on their place in the standings.

Bruce Brown's departure is the most obvious change to this roster. Brown was incredible in his time with the Nuggets. He averaged 11.5 points, 4.1 rebounds and 3.4 assists in 80 games last season. His efficiency differential on Cleaning The Glass ranked in the 21st percentile (-6.3), but that is a symptom of playing with the best player in the NBA. Denver still outscored opponents by 1.1 points per 100 possessions with Brown in the regular season, and his postseason impact was insane.

The Nuggets outscored opponents in the playoffs by 9.4 points per 100 possessions with Brown on the floor. When he played with the starting lineup in place of Caldwell-Pope, they posted a +50.9 net rating and averaged 1.463 points per possession. He even closed out a win in the Finals over Miami, dropping 21 points on 8-of-11 shooting from the floor.

Not only is Brown gone, but so too is Jeff Green who averaged 7.8 points, 2.6 rebounds and 1.2 assists in 56 regular season games last season. And while Brown and Green might not register as massive losses for some, their departures are magnified by who is taking on their roles this season.

In the frontcourt behind Gordon and Jokic is a mix of unproven talent, as Zeke Nnaji and Peyton Watson are currently penciled in as the primary backup options for Jokic and Gordon.

Nnaji averaged only 14.7 minutes last season, and when he played center, which were 80% of his minutes, the Nuggets were outscored by 7.8 points per 100 possessions. Nnaji is athletic enough to get up the floor in transition on offense, and he is good enough from distance that he needs to be respected from the perimeter, but he is slight for a five and has never been an effective rebounder. Watson appeared in only nine games his rookie season and is a massive unknown from a production standpoint.

Bettors might remember Christian Braun playing impactful minutes in the Finals, but the reality is Braun averaged only 4.7 points and 2.4 rebounds in 15.5 minutes per game. His role will be exponentially larger this season. Of the three players penciled in on the two deep only one - Nnaji - has more than two years of experience. Rookie Jalen Pickett, who signed a four-year, \$8.3 million deal, will even play a role for this team in the regular season.

There is a core of veterans on this bench too. However, they do come with their flaws.

It has been eight seasons since DeAndre Jordan positively impacted a team's net rating (-17.2 efficiency differential last season). Reggie Jackson will also take on a much bigger role for the Nuggets this season now that Brown is gone. Jackson can be an effective offensive player and off-ball guard, but having him as the primary scoring guard is not ideal. He has not finished better than the 29th percentile in points per shot attempt in the last two seasons.

Once the postseason begins, this team will be as formidable as it was last season. But, this regular season will be about developing young players for larger roles once the postseason begins, and that could lead to an overall decline from the production this team had last season.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

The bench might be worse than it was last season, but Denver's schedule might allow it to still finish as one of the top three seeds in the Western Conference.

According to Positive Residual, the Nuggets have the lowest strength of schedule (.485). Denver's net rest advantage is even, with only nine games with an advantage and nine with a disadvantage, and it is also among the 10 teams with the fewest back-to-backs (13) this season.

As bettors also know, they have one of the stronger homecourt advantages in the NBA. Last year the Nuggets went 44-8 SU/30-21-1 ATS in both the regular and postseasons. Denver outscored opponents by 11.0 points per 100 possessions at home in the regular season in non-garbage time. That was the second-best net rating at home in the league. Should they hold serve at home once more this team will push to surpass its win total.

But, this is not the same team. At the top, the elite talent remains, but the depth is unproven. It is likely that the Nuggets will make sure the young role players on this roster get plenty of run throughout the regular season, as they will need to be ready for what Denver hopes to be another run at a championship.

Those factors and the highest win total on the board equate to a play on the Under. The Nuggets are a threat to win the NBA Finals once again, but to ask this team to win 55 or more games when there are so many unknown factors on the bench is not a wager worth making.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 54.5

**Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel**



DETROIT

Pistons

CENTRAL DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 17-65 SU, 35-44-3 ATS, 41-41-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
91.5 (#29 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Joe Harris
Monte Morris

Losses

Hamidou Diallo
Cory Joseph
Rodney McGruder

NBA Draft

1 (5) Ausar Thompson
1 (25) Marcus Sasser

TEAM PREVIEW

Detroit was a popular wager at the window in the offseason last year, but poor health to key players tanked a once-promising season. Health will be key this year if the Pistons are to take legitimate steps forward in their youth movement, specifically when it comes to their potential superstar Cade Cunningham.

Cunningham has played only 76 games in his first two seasons in the NBA, but despite the small sample size the potential has been clear. He averaged 19.9 points, 6.2 rebounds and 6.0 assists in the 12 games last season, and in both years he had a positive net differential for Detroit. In the short window in which he played before being injured last season, he showed an improved mid-range game by shooting 42.7% on mid-range attempts, and he's already proven to be an adept passer in his time in the NBA. He also turned heads during his time with the Team USA Select Team this summer. His health is the top priority for Detroit if they are going to win more than 23 games for the first time since the 2018-2019 season.

However, Cunningham's presence will only be part of the battle for the Pistons. This team needs to improve on both ends of the floor in a big way, as they finished 28th in non-garbage time net rating (-8.6) and 29th in both offensive (110.6) and defensive (119.2) efficiency.

For the offense, better shooting will go a long way toward improving their output. Detroit shot just 35.9% from beyond the arc last season, and some of those inefficiencies can be chalked up to variance. The Pistons were 19th in 3-point percentage on uncontested looks last season (38.2%) despite generating the 11th-most per game. Cleaning The Glass' location effective field goal percentage (a metric that tells you what a team's effective field goal percentage would be if they shot league average from the floor) had them at 54.8% compared to the actual 52.3% the team posted.

Cunningham's presence and ability as a passer should allow this team to continue generating uncontested looks, and improved personnel will bring up this team's shooting floor.

Joe Harris could be a trade candidate at the deadline due to his expiring deal, but he is a career 43.7% shooter who hit 42.9% of his catch-and-shoot 3-point attempts last season. Monte Morris is also on an expiring deal, but he is a deadly shooter with a career 39.2% hit rate who can play off-ball next to guys like Cunningham if need be.

But those are the veterans. If it is going to succeed this season, the real driving force for this team will be the other young pieces on the roster.

Jaden Ivey averaged 16.3 points, 3.9 rebounds and 5.2 assists last season, but he did it on an inefficient 41.6% shooting from the floor. He also failed to impact the team positively on the defensive end. He finished in the 11th percentile in foul rate (4.2%), and when he was on the floor, the Pistons allowed 5.3 more points per 100 possessions. His efficiency will likely improve by playing with Cunningham, but his awareness on the defensive end will need to improve greatly.

Jalen Duren and Isaiah Stewart have proven to be very good frontcourt players. Duren specifically was one of the key factors in the Pistons' success on the offensive glass. He ranked in the 92nd percentile in offensive rebounding rate (13.4%) and improved the team's overall offensive rebounding rate by 3.3% when on the floor. Stewart was a tremendous rim protector who improved Detroit's defensive field goal percentage at the rim by 3.4% when on the floor. Their trajectory is positive, so both need to stay healthy this season.

Ausar Thompson joins the team as the fifth overall selection in the 2023 draft, and he gives the Pistons a legit wing defender. His shooting could be a question, but he will also make this team deadly in transition.

This season will be all about the development of the young players on this roster and the health of Cunningham. Should Detroit's franchise player be able to stay on the floor, this team should take the steps forward the betting market expected it to last season.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Detroit's win total of 27.5 is two wins shorter than the closing number last season, but one could argue that this team is better than last offseason. Ivey and Duren now have a year of NBA games under their belt, and the additions of Harris and Morris give the Pistons two knockdown shooters the team did not have last season. The front office also upgraded the head coaching position with the hire of Monty Williams. If there was a coach who could maximize the production of a young roster like this, it would be Williams.

The schedule does present some challenges for Detroit. It only gets six games with a true rest advantage, and their nine games in which they will be at a disadvantage give them a negative net rest advantage. The Pistons are also among the nine teams with 15 back-to-backs this season, and they do not get a homestand of more than three games until January. Detroit is young, but those will be challenges that will work against this team surpassing its win total.

Still, it is hard to ignore this team's potential, especially if Cunningham can stay healthy. Their second-year players received great experience, and the veterans on this roster fill the holes nicely. There is certainly a chance some of those older players are gone after the trade deadline, but for now, they are Pistons, and this is a team that can deliver on the hype it received a season prior.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 27.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



GOLDEN STATE

Warriors

PACIFIC DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 50-45 SU, 44-51-0 ATS, 50-40-5 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
102.0 (#5 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Chris Paul
Cory Joseph
Dario Saric
Usman Garuba

Losses

Jordan Poole
Donte DiVincenzo
Ty Jerome

NBA Draft

1 (19) Brandin Podziemski
2 (57) Trayce Jackson-Davis

TEAM PREVIEW

The 2022-2023 season for Golden State was chaotic, to say the least. From the practice incident between Draymond Green and Jordan Poole, to the 11-30 SU/13-28 ATS record on the road and Stephen Curry missing 26 games, the Warriors never found their footing.

Personnel changes in the offseason seem geared toward not only improving the locker room dynamic for Golden State but also toward solving an issue that has haunted this team for the last two seasons: the non-Curry minutes.

When Curry was off the floor last season, the Warriors were outscored by 2.1 points per 100 possessions, and their offensive rating of 113.0 ranked in the 35th percentile. Those figures are much better than the season prior when Golden State had a 109.4 offensive rating without Curry, but it is still a large issue for this team.

In an effort to fix that problem, the team shipped off Jordan Poole and brought in Chris Paul from Phoenix. As of now, Paul has been somewhat cantankerous when it comes to his role with his new team, but bringing him off the bench is the best option for Steve Kerr.

The highest average scorer from last season on the bench right now outside of Paul is Jonathan Kuminga, who averaged 9.9 points per game. However, 70% of Kuminga's made field goals were assisted on, meaning he is not a shot creator. Paul would give Golden State a shot creator amongst players who would thrive with a floor general like Paul. It would also limit a massive size issue starting Paul would manifest.

Golden State was 14th in overall rebounding rate last season (50.2%) and starting Paul would likely mean benching Kevon Looney in order to keep the core of Curry, Klay Thompson, Andrew Wiggins and Draymond Green together. While those five could be an effective small-ball lineup, throwing that starting five out on a daily basis would present challenges once again on the glass for the Warriors.

There is also the potential that the decline in Paul's game is real, and that Golden State acquired a guard who does not have much to offer. Paul averaged a career-worst 13.9 points per game on the worst points per shot attempt mark (110.8) since his second year in the league. He was consistently targeted on defense by opposing perimeter players. He is also already showing some resistance to what could be a role off the bench.

Even if Paul does hit — in whatever role he gets — there are some questions regarding the offensive production of the backups.

As previously mentioned, the bench lacks true shot-creators and scoring options. Moses Moody has shown flashes in his two seasons while shooting 36.3% from deep, but he's only averaged 12.4 minutes per game and has not been a statistical positive in his time on the floor. Cory Joseph is a solid defender who can facilitate, but is not a knockdown shooter or lethal scorer. Gary Payton II is a great defender, but he's an inconsistent shooter who is only lethal from the corners.

You get the idea.

The reality is, this season is all about what the bench can do for Golden State, because its foundation of Curry, Thompson and Green is still among the best in the league.

Curry improved the Warriors' net rating by 8.6 points per 100 possessions on the floor last season, and he posted the third-best marks in his career in both points per 100 shot attempts (134.0) and points per game (29.4). The Warriors' most-used lineup with him on the floor ranked in the 92nd percentile in net rating (+22.1) and averaged 128.5 points per 100 possessions.

There are some who might be concerned that Thompson is on the decline after he shot 38.8% from the floor and 36.8% from beyond the arc in the postseason, but he was a good player in the regular season. He shot 41.2% on 10.6 3-point attempts per game, and improved Golden State's net rating by 3.6 points every 100 possessions on the floor.

Green is still one of the best defenders in the NBA, and when he was on the floor the Warriors allowed 9.8 fewer points per 100 possessions. He is still just as effective as a facilitator of this offense. Green ranked in the 98th percentile at his position in assist rate (26.7%), and his presence on the floor improved the Warriors' offensive rating by 4.2 points per 100 possessions.

Those three, along with Andrew Wiggins and Kevon Looney form one of the best starting lineups in the NBA, and as long as they can play this team will be live to win a fifth Larry O'Brien trophy.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Positive Residual ranks Golden State's schedule as the sixth-hardest schedule in the league. They play six games with a rest advantage, but nine will take place where they are at a disadvantage. They are also among the nine teams with 15 back-to-backs on the schedule, and they travel the 10th most miles.

All of this should come into consideration, especially for a team that struggled so greatly on the road last season. A 41-game sample size can be considered small, so it is likely that last year's road issues are just an anomaly. However, we must also assume time missed for key players.

Curry has missed 44 games over the last two seasons. Green only missed nine last season, but 36 the season prior and has played less than 50 games in two of the last four seasons. If either of those two miss time this season this team could take a severe hit to its record. When you factor in how deep both the Pacific and the Western Conference are, it's hard to recommend playing this team Over its win total.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 49.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



HOUSTON Rockets

SOUTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 22-60 SU, 32-46-4 ATS, 41-41-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
93.0 (#25 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Fred VanVleet
Dillon Brooks
Jock Landale
Jeff Green
Aaron Holiday

Losses

KJ Martin
TyTy Washington Jr.
Usman Garuba

NBA Draft

1 (4) Amen Thompson
1 (20) Cam Whitmore

TEAM PREVIEW

Houston went all in this offseason, and the goal is clear: compete for a spot in the postseason. The front office not only used free agency to acquire veterans for this team to jumpstart the current rebuild, but it also hired a no-nonsense coach with a good defensive background in Ime Udoka. There are many who have expressed skepticism about this plan in the long run for the Rockets, but for this season it could lead to results.

The biggest additions to this roster in free agency were Fred VanVleet and Dillon Brooks, and while they should help improve this team on both ends, it is the defense where these two can help the most.

Houston was 29th in non-garbage time defensive efficiency last season (119.7) and 30th the season prior (117.8). The Rockets have not had a defender capable of taking on an opponent's best perimeter option, and now they have that in Brooks. VanVleet is not a lockdown defender, but he is a savvy team defender who improved Toronto's defensive rating each season but one in his time there. Add in the potential of Jabari Smith Jr. as the 3-and-D wing Houston drafted him to be and this team suddenly looks competent on that end of the floor.

The offensive production will be the real challenge for this team.

Despite having a talented offensive player like Jalen Green, the Rockets finished 27th in non-garbage time offensive efficiency (111.0). Green himself declined in efficiency last season — averaged only 108.8 points per 100 shot attempts — and the team ranked 29th or lower in shooting from all three areas of the floor. Outside of Green, the current projected starting lineup isn't rife with offensive talent.

VanVleet is a 37.3% career shooter who can play off of Green, but he isn't a shot creator — Toronto averaged 0.88 points per possession on 1.4 VanVleet isolations per game — and Brooks is an inconsistent chucker who is coming off a career-low in points per shot attempt (99.6). Smith is going to need to show some real improvements as a shooter this season — he shot just 30.5% from deep — for this team to show some growth on offense. Do not forget that Udoka was not the most adept offensive coach in his time in Boston either.

This team's ceiling will be determined by its depth, but the issue with that is that the depth is extremely unproven.

Tari Eason ranked in the 84th percentile at his position in efficiency differential (+5.8), but he is only a second-year player. Jock Landale comes in from Phoenix after a career year, but his rookie season in San Antonio was much less productive, and he doesn't have Devin Booker or Kevin Durant opening the floor for him. Amen Thompson and Cam Whitmore are both extremely talented, but they are rookies. Kevin Porter Jr. is also on the way out due to his continued history of being a terrible human being.

So while we can make the case that this team will be better on defense, the jury is still out on whether or not this team will be able to field an adequate offense. There could be concerns about the availability of its young players as well. Thompson already dealt with an ankle injury that threw doubt over his availability for training camp, and medical concerns caused Whitmore to fall in the draft.

Speaking of Whitmore, he is one of the few award candidates on this roster. His odds to win Rookie of the Year went from 100-1 to 20-1 after a dominant Summer League showing in which he averaged 20.4 points, 5.6 rebounds and 3.0 steals to win MVP. Green is the other award contender on this team. As a third-year player on a team now filled with veterans it wouldn't be surprising to see his efficiency spike, and should that be the case he fits the parameters for Most Improved Player, for which he is 45-1 to win it at DraftKings.

Houston has covered just 40.2% of its games over the last two seasons, and judging by the market, this team will be at the bottom of the market's power ratings to start the season as well. It presents an opportunity for bettors who believe this experiment will work though. Should the Rockets prove to be an adequate NBA team due to this infusion of veteran talent and leadership, they will make a great ATS play to begin the season.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

The schedule will be one of the biggest obstacles in the path of the Rockets surpassing their win total this season. Positive Residual gives them the second-hardest strength of schedule in the league (0.526), ahead of only San Antonio. Houston has one of the worst net rest advantages in the NBA (-5) and 10 games this season at which they are at a true rest disadvantage. Factor this in with their division that has three teams that are much better than them and another, San Antonio, which is similarly rated, and that comes out to a daunting slate.

They do get the advantage of playing three games against Memphis before Ja Morant's return from suspension, and nine of their first 14 games are at home which can give this team a chance to establish a rhythm and practice before the brunt of their schedule begins. With a coach like Udoka and a veteran core, that is a big advantage.

Despite the rigors of the schedule, this team feels like a candidate to go Over its win total. Their offseason actions dictate that this is a team that will try to win every game possible and not eventually fold down the stretch in favor of draft compensation. The veterans they signed raise the floor of their production, and they should be a decent defensive team, at least by comparison to previous iterations of this roster. It's not going to be a fun win total to track, but Over is the way to go.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 31.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



INDIANA Pacers

CENTRAL DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 35-47 SU, 42-38-2 ATS, 41-40-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

95.5 (#22 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Bruce Brown Jr.
Obi Toppin

Losses

Chris Duarte
Oshae Brissett

NBA Draft

1 (8) Jarace Walker
1 (26) Ben Sheppard
2 (47) Mojave King
2 (55) Isaiah Wong

TEAM PREVIEW

Indiana surprised many teams last season when it got off to the start it did. The betting market was shocked as well, as it only took 54 games for the Pacers to surpass their win total. This season the market is strong on Indiana. Their win total has been bet up a win at DraftKings, and the market has given them a 43.5% chance of making it to the playoffs this season. It is easy to see why bettors feel the way they do, but we are certainly near the top of the market price for the Pacers which makes betting on this team somewhat tricky.

If Indiana is going to achieve the lofty goals set for it by the betting market, then it will do with an offense that gave opponents problems last season. The Pacers only averaged 114.7 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time overall, but where they thrived was in transition.

Indiana led the NBA in points added per 100 plays in transition (4.2), overall offensive efficiency in transition off live rebounds (131.8) and fastbreak points per game (18.1). This figures to be an elite transition offense once again this season, and much of that will be driven by Tyrese Haliburton.

According to Cleaning The Glass, the Pacers' transition frequency jumped by 1.2% when Haliburton was on the floor. He helped improve their overall offensive efficiency in transition by 4.9 points every 100 plays as well, and he was an incredible offensive spark for Indiana. Haliburton averaged 20.7 points and 10.4 assists per game last season, shooting 49.0% from the floor and 40.0% from the 3-point range. His efficiency differential (+6.1) ranked in the 84th percentile. He is among the best offensive players in the league, and complementary pieces surround him.

Benedict Mathurin had a strong rookie season in which he averaged 16.7 points and 4.1 rebounds per game, and the expectation is that he will take a positive step forward in his development. Myles Turner was brilliant last season. He ranked in the 83rd percentile in efficiency differential and improved the Pacers' defensive efficiency by 2.7 points every 100 possessions on the floor. Turner also had his best 3-point shooting season (37.3%) since 2018-2019.

The team also did well to add to this group in the offseason.

Bruce Brown joins the team after helping Denver win the NBA Finals last season. He is the perfect Swiss Army knife that can play off the ball when sharing the floor with the likes of Haliburton or Andrew Nembhard, while also being able to bring the ball up himself. Obi Toppin is a perfect fit for a team that runs the floor as often as Indiana does as well.

Despite those good vibes though, there are issues with this team that could arise and foil a potential playoff berth.

The transition offense might be effective, but this team still finished 21st in overall offensive efficiency because of an abysmal halfcourt offense that managed just 96.5 points per 100 plays. Indiana also lacked a true presence on the offensive glass last season, which did not allow them to mask the halfcourt issues with second-chance points. Rookie Jerace Walker could help in that regard, but it is unlikely he helps them enough on the offensive boards to vault this halfcourt offense up the standings.

There is also the question of defense.

Indiana was the fifth-worst defense in non-garbage time last season. It allowed 118.7 points per 100 possessions overall and ranked 21st in transition defensive efficiency (129.2) and 24th in halfcourt defensive efficiency (100.2). The additions made to this team in the offseason will not fix those issues, so it's safe to expect this team to finish below average on that end of the floor again.

Remember too that Buddy Hield is expected to be traded at some point. That is a player who averaged 16.8 points per game for this team a season ago that will not be on the roster for the vast majority, if not the entirety, of this season.

It's easy to see the potential for Indiana and why the betting market has come around so strongly on this team. However, it's clear that this team still has some issues, and if the expected development of certain young players does not take place, then some bettors could find themselves in a sweat early.

It will be fascinating to see what the betting market does with this team on a nightly basis as well. The Pacers were just 42-39-1 ATS last season and showed themselves overvalued in the favorite role (8-10-1 ATS). Bettors could find some value in going against this team early in the year.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Indiana won 35 games last season, and the betting market for this season is 38.5 at DraftKings. Bettors who believe this team can surpass that win total will need an improvement of four wins, but some factors are working against them. The Pacers were lucky to grind out 25 wins in 48 clutch games last season despite posting a negative net rating in clutch time (-3.7). There is also no logical reason to assume improved defensive play from a team that brings back a majority of the roster from last season.

Those looking to make the case for the Over on Indiana's win total can point to their schedule though. Positive Residual has them with the 10th-lowest strength of schedule in the NBA. The Pacers do have a negative net rest advantage (-1) but only nine games total with a true rest advantage. They also get the benefit of playing only 13 back-to-backs while traveling the fewest miles in the league.

This is a tight win total decision. Haliburton played in only 56 games last season, and should he be available to play 65 or more games that could be the difference with a win total such as this, especially when the team's schedule is as opportunistic as theirs is. Those factors are enough to recommend this team to go Over its win total and compete for a Play-In berth.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 38.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



LOS ANGELES

Clippers

PACIFIC DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 45-42 SU, 43-44-0 ATS, 43-44-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
100.5 (#8 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions
K.J. Martin

Losses
Eric Gordon

NBA Draft
1 (30) Kobe Brown
2 (48) Jordan Miller

TEAM PREVIEW

Despite another disappointing season which ended in the first round of the Western Conference playoffs the Los Angeles Clippers are running it back. Health has been the biggest hindrance to Los Angeles' championship aspirations, but the potential of what this team could be with Kawhi Leonard and Paul George remains so it makes sense to keep this experiment intact.

One might roll their eyes at the thought of Los Angeles being a title contender once more, but there is a big difference this season as opposed to past ones: the betting market does not believe anymore.

Last season, the Clippers were +700 to win the NBA Finals before the season began, and their preseason win total was 52.5 consensus. This season, that same team is +1800 to win the Finals with a win total of 46.5 at DraftKings, and the only real changes to this team are Russell Westbrook at point guard and KJ Martin coming off the bench.

Bettors being hesitant to back Los Angeles once again is understandable, but it would also be unwise to ignore what this team has shown us when the pieces are together.

When Leonard and George were on the floor together last season, the Clippers outscored opponents by 8.3 points every 100 possessions. Almost every metric tied to the duo was well above average. Their offensive rating of 120.3 ranked in the 91st percentile of qualified lineups. They averaged 144.3 points per 100 plays in transition which ranked in the 97th percentile. Opponents were limited to 112.0 points per 100 possessions as well.

But none of this should come as a surprise to those reading this. We know that Leonard and George are great when they are available, but when will they be available? How do you handicap a team whose stars have played 142 games together since they became teammates, 38 of which came last season?

Both head coach Ty Lue and president Lawrence Frank have expressed that Los Angeles should, and will, take the regular season more seriously. Taking the regular season seriously does not stop George from hyperextending his knee in the fourth quarter of a game in March when going up for a rebound, but it does mean more games from the team's best players when the betting market has finally lowered its expectations of it.

Even if both Leonard and George surpass what we've seen in terms of availability, questions about this team need to be answered.

Westbrook was very good in his time with the Clippers last season. He averaged 15.8 points, 4.9 rebounds and 7.6 assists in the 21 games he played with the team, and he did it on an efficient 48.9% shooting from the floor while putting up the best points per shot attempt mark of his career (112.3). Westbrook could replicate that production once more over a full season, or he could regress to the player cast out by the Lakers less than two seasons after acquiring him.

Lue must also figure out what has ailed this offense each of the last two seasons.

Los Angeles has consistently been one of the best shooting teams in the NBA for some time, and last season was no different with the team finishing fourth in 3-point accuracy (38.4%). However, the team was 22nd in non-garbage time offensive efficiency (114.4), making it the second consecutive season in which the Clippers finished in the bottom 10 of teams in offensive efficiency.

This is also one of the oldest teams in the league, especially at the top of the depth chart. The front office has done a good job in getting younger depth, which should help offset time missed from the veterans on this roster, which seems to be a given.

Terance Mann is a steady young guard who can run the point if needed, and he improved the Clippers' offensive rating by 2.5 points every 100 possessions on the floor. KJ Martin is an extremely athletic forward who makes a deadly transition team even more lethal. Bones Hyland has promise as a scoring option off the bench as well, and in a short sample size, he improved Los Angeles' net rating by 7.9 points every 100 possessions on the floor.

Norm Powell, Mason Plumlee, Robert Covington and Marcus Morris all return as well, making this team just as deep as it was a season ago.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Los Angeles has one of the more challenging schedules in the NBA this season. Positive Residual has them with the ninth-highest strength of schedule; they are among the teams with the most back-to-backs (15); they will play three games in four nights 25 times this season — the most in the NBA — and they travel the most miles of any team. Given the known challenges for this team when it comes to the availability of its stars, it would make sense to worry about a schedule like this.

However, it is worth pointing out there are some positives to the Clippers's schedule this season, specifically at the beginning. Last season, Los Angeles had played 61 games prior to the All-Star break, the most in the NBA. This season, the Clippers will play only 53 games with a chance for 54 should they get to the NBA Cup Finals.

Knowing what we know about this team and the schedule, it is understandable that bettors would look to play this win total Under, but it will not be recommended here.

This is the lowest win total in the Kawhi Leonard-Paul George era in Los Angeles (46.5), and that season was following Leonard's ACL injury in the postseason against Utah. This is a buy-low opportunity for a team that has younger depth than the previous season and a somewhat manageable schedule at the front end.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 46.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



LOS ANGELES

Lakers

PACIFIC DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 52-47 SU, 50-47-2 ATS, 51-48-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
101.5 (#6 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Gabe Vincent
Jaxson Hayes
Taurean Prince
Cam Reddish
Christian Wood

Losses

Dennis Schröder
Troy Brown Jr.
Malik Beasley
Mo Bamba
Lonnie Walker IV

NBA Draft

1 (17) Jalen Hood-Schifino
2 (40) Maxwell Lewis

TEAM PREVIEW

General manager Rob Pelinka overhauled the roster once again this offseason in hopes of improving a team that made a run to the Western Conference Finals. There are few who would not deem Los Angeles an offseason winner, which means the Lakers find themselves as one of the four likeliest Western Conference champions by the betting market standards.

One glance at the moves Pelinka made this offseason, and it becomes clear that the objective for Los Angeles was to get better shooting.

The Lakers were the second-worst shooting team in the postseason (33.5%) of the teams that played multiple series. They were also a low-frequency shooting team, taking only 30.6% of their attempts from beyond the arc. That was painfully obvious in the series loss to Denver, where Los Angeles made 21 fewer 3-pointers and took 38 less than the eventual champions.

To address those issues the front office signed Gabe Vincent, Taurean Prince and Christian Wood. Vincent was brilliant for Miami in its run to the Finals last season, shooting 37.8% on 6.1 attempts per game. Prince is a career 37.2% shooter who shot 40.9% on catch-and-shoot 3-point attempts last season. Wood has shot 37.9% in his career, and he shot 41.8% on catch-and-shoot attempts with Dallas.

All three should fit perfectly alongside ball-dominant players like LeBron James and Anthony Davis, and they address the biggest weakness Los Angeles had heading into the offseason.

Wood is also the second addition in the frontcourt, joining Jaxson Hayes who was brought in by Pelinka as well. The Lakers had a real issue in finding minutes at center behind Davis as the season progressed. When Davis played the five, Los Angeles outscored opponents by 4.7 points per 100 possessions, but with anyone else at center, they had a -3.9 net rating. The depth there isn't perfect, but Hayes can spell Davis while still providing a presence on the glass and Wood gives them a floor-spacing center option for more offensive-oriented lineups.

Los Angeles also retained their biggest assets this offseason by re-signing both Austin Reaves, who had a solid summer for Team USA at the FIBA World Cup, and Rui Hachimura.

By all accounts, it was a successful offseason, but even the most successful summers come with questions, and this team still has those as we enter the 2023-2024 season. For example, what if the shooting isn't what we expect it to be?

Vincent is a career 33.9% shooter, and he has shot 33.4% or worse in three of his four seasons in the NBA. Hachimura hit an incredible 48.7% of his 3-point attempts in the postseason, but he shot just 29.6% in the regular season for Los Angeles and is a career 34.7% shooter. D'Angelo Russell shot 41.4% in a Laker uniform, but he is only a 36.2% shooter for his career.

Prince and Reaves should be reliable shooting options, although Reaves dramatically improved his shooting last season as well and could regress, but there is a reality in which each of these questionable shooters become what we've seen throughout their careers, and the Lakers are stuck with the same problem as last season.

We can also question whether or not this depth at center will really work for Los Angeles enough to give Davis more rest and allow the Lakers to play dual bigs like they did in their run to a title in the bubble.

New Orleans was absolutely demolished when Hayes played center for them in his time there. The best season Hayes had in his minutes at center was his rookie year in which the Pelicans had a -1.3 net rating with him at the five. In the last two seasons, New Orleans posted -8.1 and -9.0 net ratings when he played center. Wood is a great offensive player, but the Lakers won't be able to play long stretches of minutes with him at the five without being exploited on defense.

The presence of James and Davis will always make Los Angeles one of the better teams in the NBA, but so much of the positivity around this version of the Lakers hinges on certain players being versions of themselves which larger sample sizes of data tell us they are not. It could lead to the Lakers being a good team but somewhat overvalued in the betting markets.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Los Angeles has the fourth-highest strength of schedule, according to Positive Residual. The Lakers have a negative net rest advantage (-5) and are among the nine teams with the most back-to-backs on their schedule (15). They too have questions about the availability of their stars in the regular season.

James has missed 51 games combined in the last two seasons, and Davis has missed 68 games over that same span. Given Davis' injury history and James' increasing age, it is almost certain that this duo will miss some time in the regular season. Without those two on the floor, this is a team that could struggle to defend at a high level, especially inside.

We obviously cannot project when those absences will happen, but if we can assume some missed time for a team's best players, and that team happens to play in the hardest division in the NBA, it would be hard to swallow a price on Over 48.5 wins.

Los Angeles should be clear of the Play-In Tournament this season, and if healthy they will be a contender in the Western Conference, but given the construction of this team it's not one that projects to have enough regular season success to push for 50 wins. Especially if some of the new faces revert to form.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 48.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



MEMPHIS

Grizzlies

SOUTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 53-35 SU, 39-46-3 ATS, 38-48-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
100.0 (#10 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Marcus Smart
Isaiah Todd
Derrick Rose

Losses

Dillon Brooks

NBA Draft

2 (45) Gregory Jackson
2 (56) Tarik Biberovic

TEAM PREVIEW

A first-round loss to Los Angeles seemingly motivated Memphis' front office to shake up certain parts of its roster in the offseason. Dillon Brooks was allowed to walk, and the team flipped two first-round picks and Tyus Jones for Marcus Smart. It's an intriguing piece to put next to Ja Morant and Desmond Bane in the backcourt, but the first priority for this team is not basketball-related.

Morant will miss the first 25 games of the season due to a suspension handed down over the summer by the NBA. Morant has consistently stepped into trouble off the court, and those issues weighed down the team last season and will affect the team this season.

Memphis was 16-28 SU/14-28-2 ATS on the road overall and an astonishing 0-19 SU/2-17 ATS as a road underdog. The struggles away from home seemingly tied into Morant and the young Grizzlies putting fun over basketball, as evidenced by a team meeting in which Steven Adams had to address the team's focus on road trips. One would assume that Morant's suspension would get this team to focus on the right things, but bettors will need evidence of that first.

Now we must evaluate this team with Morant's absence in mind. The first thought for some might be that the Grizzlies do well without their star guard, but this team is much different than the one that went 20-5 SU without Morant two seasons ago.

Last season Memphis went just 11-10 SU without Morant. In the minutes without him on the floor, the Grizzlies posted a +2.3 net rating, but compared to the 7.3 points per 100 possessions by which they outscored opponents without Morant, that net rating is average. This team is also much different in terms of depth. Not only is Brooks on another team, but it is unlikely Brandon Clarke, who suffered a torn Achilles in March, plays this season. Jones is now in Washington and in his place is an aging Derrick Rose off the bench. The depth of this team is nowhere near the same as the last two seasons.

That is not to say there is nothing to like about the Grizzlies. Once Morant's suspension has been served and he returns, there are still plenty of positives for this team.

One of Memphis' biggest weaknesses last season was its inconsistent shooting. It took 34% of its attempts from deep, but they only shot 35.7% overall and 35.0% on non-corner attempts. This version of the Grizzlies should be better in that category.

Smart is only a career 32.3% shooter, but he has improved as his career has gone along. He was a high-volume shooter his last four seasons in Boston, averaging 5.7 attempts per game. At the very least, he is good enough that teams must respect his presence along the perimeter and is capable of shooting about 37% from the corners.

Bane is an established, elite shooter in the NBA who has shot 42.5% for his career overall. Luke Kennard shot 51.6% from deep in his time with Memphis last season, and a full season with him on the roster gives them another elite shot-maker from deep. John Konchar had a down shooting season by his standards last year (33.9% on 2.5 attempts per game), but he is a career 37.4% shooter who hit 42.1% of catch-and-shoot attempts the season prior.

Memphis also still has an elite frontcourt pairing in Jaren Jackson Jr., the reigning Defensive Player of the Year, and Steven Adams. When those two were on the floor last season, Memphis outscored opponents by 15.9 points per 100 possessions, and it had a 104.1 defensive rating. Those lineups also ranked in the 100th percentile in offensive rebounding rate and the 92nd percentile in defensive rebounding rate. That should remain a strength once again.

All of this fits wonderfully around Morant when he is on the floor. Morant is an incredible scorer off the bounce who can put pressure on the rim unlike any guard in the league. Last season, he ranked in the 96th percentile in assist rate by dishing dimes on 41.2% of his teammates' made shot attempts. How he fits off the ball with a player like Smart will be fascinating to watch, but there is no question that the Grizzlies will be among the highest power-rated teams when Morant returns from his absence.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Betting this team's win total will provide a challenge to bettors. Obviously, the team will look different for the first 25 games of the season as Morant sits due to suspension. Once Morant returns, there will likely be a stretch of inconsistent play from Memphis, as he plays regular season games with Smart and the team's new iteration for the first time.

The schedule itself does not provide immense challenges from its construction. Memphis has 12 games in which it has a true rest advantage, and 12 games with a disadvantage. They also have 14 back-to-backs this season, but only four come during the 25 games without Morant. They play nine divisional games without Morant, which could factor into division bets made before the season.

Morant's suspension throws a wrench into things to win total bettors, and Morant's injury history is also substantial. As a guard who challenges the rim as often as he does, Morant does miss time frequently outside of suspension. There is a reality in which he misses about 30 games due to the suspension combined with games lost to injury.

That factor makes this a win total hard to realistically bet over the total. When fully formed this should be a team on par with some of the best teams in the Western Conference. However, there will be opportunities to pounce on that later in the regular season. For now, it's a better bet to go Under on a win total for Memphis.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 45.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



MIAMI

Heat

SOUTHEAST DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 58-49 SU, 46-58-3 ATS, 51-53-3 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
100.0 (#11 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Josh Richardson
Thomas Bryant
R.J. Hampton

Losses

Max Strus
Gabe Vincent
Victor Oladipo
Cody Zeller
Udonis Haslem (retired)
Omar Yurtseven

NBA Draft

1 (18) Jaime Jaquez Jr.

TEAM PREVIEW

For almost the entirety of the NBA offseason, everybody on the planet was under the impression that Damian Lillard would be traded to the Heat. However, the Portland Trail Blazers ended up sending the star guard to the Milwaukee Bucks right before the start of training camp.

Without Lillard, it's hard to view the Heat as a championship contender. I know Miami made it all the way to the NBA Finals last year, but a lot broke right for the Heat along the way. For starters, the Heat shot a league-best 38.0% from 3 throughout the postseason, despite shooting just 34.4% (27th in NBA) from deep in the regular season. They were unsustainably hot in the first few rounds, and they ended up cooling down considerably against the Denver Nuggets. On top of that, Miami had a lot of injury luck along the way. I know Tyler Herro broke his hand and missed almost the entire playoffs for the Heat, but Miami's opponents were a bit worse off than that.

The Heat do deserve credit for beating the opponents in front of them, and there's no denying that they're built better for the playoffs than they are for the regular season. But Miami only went 44-38 during the regular season last year, and the team didn't do much to add talent in the offseason. With that in mind, I don't see the Heat flirting with 50 wins in 2023-24. And I actually think they'll once again be battling just to avoid the Play-In Tournament.

The good news for Miami is that Jimmy Butler and Bam Adebayo are still on the team. Butler is coming off a remarkable season, as he averaged 22.9 points, 5.9 rebounds, 5.3 assists and 1.8 steals per game in 33.4 minutes per game. The 34-year-old also shot a career-high 53.9% from the floor, and he took things to a whole other level in the playoffs. In 22 postseason games, Butler averaged 26.9 points, 6.5 rebounds, 5.9 assists and 1.8 steals per game, and he made a strong case for being a top-10 player in the league. Adebayo also had a career year for the Heat, averaging a career-high 20.4 points per game. He continues to make strides offensively, but it's his defense that makes him so special. He's one of the best two-way bigs in basketball, and it's the tenacity that he and Butler bring to both ends of the floor that makes this such an attractive situation for stars.

The presence of Butler and Adebayo also makes it easy to buy into Miami being top 10 in defensive rating again in 2023-24. The Heat were ninth in that category in the regular season last year, and they were a bit better defensively in the playoffs. So, that should be the strength of Miami again this season. Although the team will be hoping to crack the top 15 in offensive rating. If they don't end up in that range, it's hard to see them winning at least 47 games this season.

Perhaps Herro will make another leap this season. He was genuinely very good last year, averaging 20.1 points per game. However, he became a bit of a punchline this summer because he didn't quite stack up as a centerpiece in a superstar trade. The Heat will also be hoping that Nikola Jovic can be a bigger part of the team. There's a lot of Danilo Gallinari in Jovic's game, as he's a smooth forward that can hit the 3 and score creatively for a slower player. Jovic played well for Serbia in the FIBA World Cup this summer, so perhaps he's ready to contribute more. And rookie Jaime Jaquez Jr. might be a Day 1 rotation player. Jaquez played four years of college at UCLA, where he was one of the most versatile offensive players in the nation. As a senior, he averaged 17.8 points, 8.2 rebounds, 2.4 assists and 1.5 steals per game for the Bruins. Generally, guys like him can play immediately. And I think Miami can use his ability to impact games offensively.

Miami also did a nice job in scooping Josh Richardson and Thomas Bryant for cheap this summer. Richardson should help ease the pain of losing Gabe Vincent and Max Strus in free agency. He played his best basketball as a member of the Heat, and he actually averaged 16.6 points per game for Miami back in 2018-19. That was the best season of his career and he knows exactly what Erik Spoelstra wants from him. And Bryant is a stretch big that just might be able to catch on in the Heat rotation. This is a team that was giving minutes to Cody Zeller last year, so there's definitely an opening if Bryant can just play a bit better defensively — and learn to accept a small role on offense.

It'll also be interesting to see what happens with Caleb Martin this year. After a good regular season, Martin was fantastic in the playoffs. He averaged 12.7 points and 5.4 rebounds per game in the postseason, and he shot 52.9% from the floor and 42.3% from deep in those 23 games. Was that a fluke or a sign of things to come? If it's the latter, maybe I'll be wrong about Miami.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

I'm just not seeing much upside with the Heat this season, and I think they got a little worse while others in the Eastern Conference got better. Even weaker teams in the East will be more competitive this season, with the Orlando Magic, Detroit Pistons and Charlotte Hornets all expected to play better basketball in 2023-24. What that means is that there won't be many easy wins out there for the Heat.

Miami could also struggle a bit to start the year, as the top players on this team put a lot of wear and tear on their bodies playing big minutes in an NBA Finals run. And it's going to take some time for Miami to get used to playing without guys like Vincent and Strus, who were massive contributors offensively last season.

The Heat will also have to find a way to manage Kyle Lowry this season. He's only getting worse as he continues to age, and keeping him fresh will likely come at the expense of some regular season wins. The same can also be said for Kevin Love.

There's just a lot working against the Heat heading into this season, so I'm not sure how they'll hit the Over on their win total. This number was up at 49.5 when it looked like they were going to get Lillard and I was considering playing the Under on it. I think Miami would be happy with just sneaking into the playoffs again. From there, the Heat will try and bully their way to another run. But I don't see them making one.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 46.5

Preview By
Zach Cohen



MILWAUKEE

Bucks

CENTRAL DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 59-28 SU, 45-37-5 ATS, 45-40-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
103.5 (#3 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Damian Lillard
Malik Beasley
Robin Lopez
Cam Payne

Losses

Jrue Holiday
Grayson Allen

NBA Draft

2 (36) Andre Jackson
2 (58) Chris Livingston

TEAM PREVIEW

In an offseason filled with massive trades that shifted the landscape of the league, the Milwaukee Bucks might have pulled off the biggest one. A week before the start of training camp Milwaukee shipped off Jrue Holiday, Grayson Allen and draft compensation to land Damian Lillard. In the following days, Holiday was picked up by Boston, so the Bucks now find themselves as co-favorites to win the NBA Finals at DraftKings (+400).

The last time Milwaukee's front office traded assets for a coveted guard they acquired Holiday and eventually won a championship. That is obviously the goal once more for the Bucks, and in pulling this off they could have one of the best duos in the NBA.

Lillard is the perfect guard to put on the floor with Giannis Antetokounmpo. Last season in Portland the Trail Blazers averaged 1.13 points per possession when Lillard was the ball-handler in a pick-and-roll. That was without Antetokounmpo on the floor. Now Lillard has a complementary piece to run those pick-and-rolls with him in the Greek Freak. Milwaukee averaged 1.08 points per possession when Antetokounmpo was the roll-man in a pick-and-roll last season. That efficiency should improve dramatically with Lillard running the show.

This addition also helps out the likes of Khris Middleton, who was often called upon to bail the offense out when it was sputtering in halfcourt situations. Middleton shot 38.8% on catch-and-shoot attempts in the 2021-2022 season - the last season in which he played more than 33 games - and will now find himself with much better looks as a result of sharing the floor with Lillard and Antetokounmpo.

Having Middleton as the third option as an offensive creator instead of the second will do wonders for this offense. Milwaukee's greatest weakness last season was its halfcourt offense, as it averaged only 99.6 points per 100 halfcourt plays. Lillard alleviates the pain for the Bucks when the game slows down in those situations, and his presence spaces the floor, allowing Antetokounmpo more room to work in.

Lillard is also comfortable running in transition, something the Bucks love to do with Antetokounmpo on the floor. In those possessions last season Milwaukee ranked in the 92nd percentile in transition frequency off live rebounds, but they averaged only 116.7 points per 100 plays. Lillard was brilliant in transition for Portland last season, improving their transition offensive rating by 10.4 points per 100 plays.

On almost every level offensively, this pairing should work for Milwaukee. However, questions do remain on defense.

Without Holiday the Bucks now have to find an option for opponents' primary backcourt scorer. Holiday is one of the best perimeter defenders in the NBA, and even shut down Lillard years earlier in a first-round series as a member of the Pelicans. Who on this team takes on the best perimeter scorer on defense now? Under Mike Budenholzer, Antetokounmpo would usually play the role of help defender, but he might be called on more frequently to defend the opposition's best player in the regular season.

Their interior defense should be just fine though. Brook Lopez returned after flirting with Houston in free agency, and he will allow Milwaukee to roll out its patented drop coverage defense if needed. When he and Antetokounmpo shared the floor last season the Bucks ranked in the 97th percentile of defensive efficiency. With Lillard at the point of attack now those numbers could dip, but with two All-Defense players up front, this will continue to be an above-average unit.

The other issue for Milwaukee, as it usually is when a team sacrifices assets to land a star player, is the team's depth is a real question. The front office did well in signing Cam Payne to shore up the backup point guard spot, but the concerns remain. Malik Beasley, Pat Connaughton and Jae Crowder make up the depth along the wing, but none of them are elite options at the position.

Regardless, this team will compete for the top seed in the Eastern Conference. The stars they are built on also have relatively steady injury histories, meaning that lack of depth could rarely rear its ugly head. Stars drive success in the NBA, and the Bucks now have two of them. They are the rightful favorites to win the NBA Finals.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

The acquisition of Lillard caused DraftKings to adjust Milwaukee's win total by two wins, meaning this team has the second-highest win total on the board behind only Boston. Unlike the Celtics though, bettors can have more faith in the core of this roster to be available. Antetokounmpo has played in at least 61 games every season of his career. Lopez only played in 13 games two seasons ago, but he has played in at least 68 games in every other season since 2015. Lillard's availability history is weaker, but prior to the last two seasons - in which Portland was tanking - he played in 66 or more games every year. If history is an indicator, then health is not a concern like it is with the Celtics.

Milwaukee also has one of the least taxing schedules in the NBA. Positive Residual gives the Bucks the fourth-lowest strength of schedule, and they travel the fourth-fewest miles this season. Their net rest advantage is negative, but by only one game, and they have an average amount of back-to-backs to deal with this season (14).

The win total for Milwaukee is obviously massive, but this one should not be bet Under. According to Cleaning The Glass' win differential metric the Bucks outperformed their statistics and added 6.1 wins to their total last season. This is a veteran group who will be able to maximize the probability of winning each game, and given the strong history of availability from its cornerstone stars, this is going to be a recommendation to the Over.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 54.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



MINNESOTA

Timberwolves

NORTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 44-45 SU, 44-45-0 ATS, 42-47-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
98.5 (#16 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Shake Milton
Troy Brown
Vit Krejci

Losses

Taurean Prince
Austin Rivers
Jaylen Nowell

NBA Draft

2 (33) Leonard Miller
2 (53) Jaylen Clark

TEAM PREVIEW

There is no question that last season was a disappointment for Minnesota. When a team acquires a player of Rudy Gobert's caliber (for the price the front office gave up), the expectation should be more than 42 wins, a Play-In Tournament berth and a gentleman's sweep in the first round of the postseason.

Minnesota will run it back this season with largely the same roster. There is obviously hope that with better health from Karl-Anthony Towns, who only played in 29 games last season, this team can finish higher in the standings. However, when a team returns intact the same issues that weighed the team down a season ago threaten to do the same the following year.

The main concern with the Timberwolves this season will be their biggest concern last season: offense.

Minnesota finished 23rd in non-garbage time offensive efficiency last season by averaging only 114.2 points per 100 possessions. Its biggest issue was a lack of scoring in transition. The team averaged 123.8 points per 100 transition plays - the seventh worst offensive rating in transition - and added the fifth least points per 100 possessions through transition play (2.1). Much of this should not come as a surprise, considering this team is built around two bigs on the floor at once.

When Gobert and Towns shared the floor last season the Timberwolves outscored opponents by just 0.9 points per 100 possessions. That was despite limiting opponents to 106.6 points per 100 possessions. The offense was a mess with those two on the floor. The middle of the floor was congested by Gobert hanging in the dunker spot when not involved in the play, and without Towns on the floor for a majority of the season, they lacked the shooting to space the floor adequately.

A healthy and more consistent Towns — he shot just 36.8% from 3-point range last season — should help alleviate some of the offensive issues this team faced, but shooting and spacing could again be a concern for Minnesota this season.

Taurean Prince is now with the Los Angeles Lakers, and the vast majority of the Timberwolves' depth consists of some inconsistent shooters. Jordan McLaughlin is a career 34.1% shooter. Nickeil Alexander-Walker might be coming off a career shooting season - 38.4% on 2.7 attempts per game - but his career mark is still 33.9%. Troy Brown also had a career year from beyond the arc - 38.1% on 3.7 attempts per game - but he is not going to get the same looks he did in his time playing with LeBron James. He is also a career 35.4% shooter.

Shooting and offense is going to be the focus here for Minnesota because even their new-look starting lineup had trouble on that end of the floor last season.

When their projected starting lineup of Mike Conley, Anthony Edwards, Jaden McDaniels, Towns and Gobert were on the floor, the Timberwolves had a +5.8 net rating, and the trio of Conley, Towns and Gobert outscored opponents by 10.3 points per 100 possessions. However, that starting lineup only averaged 106.4 points per 100 possessions and that trio had an offensive rating of 110.7 which ranked in the 20th percentile.

There is not much reason to believe this offense is going to be much better than it was last season, but this defense should be just as good as it was.

The Timberwolves finished eighth in non-garbage time defensive efficiency last season (113.7), and seventh in halfcourt defensive efficiency (96.6). That starting group was so effective because it limited opponents to 1.006 points per possession, and the trio of Conley, Gobert and Towns had a 100.4 defensive rating when on the floor together. This team has the personnel to continue to put forth that sort of efficiency on the defensive end.

This team is also extremely effective at forcing turnovers. In the two full seasons under Chris Finch, they have finished second and fifth in defensive turnover rate. It has been a staple under Finch in his time there, and they will likely be near the top of the league in that category again. Although, with Gobert on the floor they are a less effective transition team, and the Timberwolves' efficiency in transition off steals dropped from ninth to 27th last season.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Minnesota's schedule is extremely favorable, so should this team stay healthy, it should be able to maximize the number of victories it has this season. Positive Residual gives them the 16th hardest strength of schedule this season. They have the best net rest advantage a team can have (+5) and the second most overall rest advantages on the schedule (15). The Timberwolves are also among the 10 teams with only 13 back-to-backs. They also get to take advantage of their rest advantages early, as they will play 10 games with a rest advantage to just one with a disadvantage before Jan. 10 when they play Boston.

If there was a schedule a win total better wanted for a team to bet Over, it's hard not to look at Minnesota, but there are other factors outside of schedule construction that warrant a win total bet.

This will be a below-average offensive team. Gobert's presence next to Towns does congest the floor. If the role players for this team cannot adequately space the floor with their shooting, then this offense will continue to be inefficient. There is also an odd tension hanging around this team that threatens to dismantle it.

Gobert punched Kyle Anderson in the regular season finale and got suspended for a Play-In game. Edwards was vocal last season about the lack of efficiency with this offense and disdain for his role in it. Finch is a no-nonsense type of coach who gives voice to the frustrations with his team. It's not a group I'm rushing to bet Over their win total until I see improvements in both the offense and comradery.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 43.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel

NEW ORLEANS

Pelicans



SOUTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 42-41 SU, 40-42-1 ATS, 39-44-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

98.5 (#15 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Cody Zeller

Losses

Jaxson Hayes

Josh Richardson

Willy Hernangomez

NBA Draft

1 (14) Jordan Hawkins

TEAM PREVIEW

If New Orleans is going to reach its true potential this season, then the team needs much better injury luck than it has had the last season-and-a-half. Unfortunately, the Pelicans' bad luck with health has already started to rear its ugly head, and training camp has yet to begin.

Third-year guard Trey Murphy III was lost for 10-12 weeks after suffering a meniscus tear during a workout in September. Murphy played in 79 games and had career-highs in points (14.6), rebounds (3.6) and assists per game (1.4). He also shot 40.6% from deep overall, most of which came in the form of catch-and-shoot attempts on which he shot 40.7%. Murphy was a candidate to start this season, so his absence is huge.

Jose Alvarado was also lost to an injury in the offseason, although his ankle sprain is not expected to keep him from regular-season action. Alvarado has posted a positive efficiency differential in each of his first two seasons and has proven to be a plus-defender along the perimeter.

The status of both Murphy and Alvarado might not move the needle for bettors reading this guide, but their health is paramount for New Orleans to have success this season. Their injuries also represent an issue that has haunted this team for quite some time.

Last season when CJ McCollum, Brandon Ingram and Zion Williamson were on the floor, the Pelicans outscored their opponents by 19.5 points per 100 possessions. Much of that success was driven by an elite offense that ranked in the 97th percentile in efficiency (123.7). However, those three played only 10 games together last season and 172 total minutes. Ingram played in only 45 games, and Williamson played in only 29 games before missing the rest of the season.

At one point, New Orleans was 18-8 and in control of the top seed in the Western Conference last season. When the team is healthy, they can be one of the best in their conference, but up to this point, there is no reason to believe the availability will be there.

Williamson has been the poster child for this team's health issues. The former first-overall pick has played more than 29 games just once since getting drafted in 2019, but the talent is obvious when he is on the floor. In the three seasons in which he has played, he's posted an efficiency differential no worse than +7.0 according to Cleaning The Glass. He's ranked no lower than the 71st percentile at his position in points per shot attempt.

It's not breaking news that Williamson is good at basketball, but it would be breaking news if he played a majority of contests in the regular season. Therein lies the issues with the Pelicans this season. A wager on this team to succeed is a wager that Williamson and Ingram will be available.

Should those two actually play a majority of games, this team will be on par with many in the NBA. They will still have their flaws though, specifically on defense.

The Pelicans finished sixth in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (113.1), but they were insanely lucky throughout the season.

New Orleans allowed the sixth-highest frequency of 3-point attempts last season (37.8%), but opponents shot just 34.3% on those shots, the best rate in the league. One could argue that the Pelicans purposely allowed the lesser shooters to fire away, but a deeper look at the metrics paints a different picture. New Orleans allowed the third-highest frequency of wide-open 3-point attempts, but opponents shot just 36.1% on those looks, the second-lowest rate on uncontested looks by opponents. Should the Pelicans allow the same rate of wide-open looks their defense will surely regress to an average unit at best.

Should the defense regress but the availability improve New Orleans will be a candidate to be a team that plays to the Over. Their defense should regress to league average, and the trio of Williamson, Ingram and McCollum tend to play fast. When that trio was on the floor their pace (101.70) would have been the fourth highest in the league, and they ranked in the 72nd percentile in offensive efficiency in transition (130.6).

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

New Orleans does not have a particularly daunting schedule this season. Positive Residual has the Pelicans with the 14th hardest schedule in the NBA. They have a +2 net rest advantage, and they are among the 10 teams with only 13 back-to-backs. Nine of the games in which they have a rest advantage come at home as well, meaning they should be able to maximize those winnable opportunities.

Having said that, this team is much like the Los Angeles Clippers. Bettors who want to bet on this team to surpass its win total are betting that Zion Williamson will play a majority of contests this season. Unlike Los Angeles though, bettors are not buying at the bottom of the market. New Orleans had a preseason win total of 45.5 last season, so this current total does not offer much value when compared to last year.

Ultimately this leads to a look toward the Under for the Pelicans. Williamson has not proven to be durable enough for bettors to count on his durability, and his counterpart, Brandon Ingram, has played 100 games in the last two seasons and no more than 61 contests in the last three. Factor in a defense that has signs of regression and it all equates to an expectation of fewer wins than the market has hung.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 43.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



NEW YORK

Knicks

ATLANTIC DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 53-40 SU, 51-41-1 ATS, 45-44-4 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

99.5 (#12 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Donte DiVincenzo
Dylan Windler

Losses

Derrick Rose
Trevor Keels
Nathan Knight

NBA Draft

None

TEAM PREVIEW

New York's first season with Jalen Brunson on the roster went as well as the team could have hoped. The Knickerbockers won 47 games and took their first postseason series since 2013 when they defeated the Cavaliers in five games. Success like that is worth building on, and New York is doing just that by running it back this season.

There is a limit to how much better a team of veterans can be when a front office decides to retain the same core, but this was a different team in the second half of the season.

New York finished the year as the fourth-best cover team in league, including regular and postseason, at 51-39-3 ATS. After the trade deadline, the Knicks went 17-8 SU and ATS with the second-best cover margin in the league (+4.1). Their pace over that stretch was equivalent to a 59-win team, according to Cleaning The Glass. Winning that many games is unlikely for New York, but being a top-four seed in a conference that got weaker at the top is not out of the question.

The Knicks' strength last season was its offense, surprising for a Tom Thibodeau team, and it should be once more. New York averaged 118.7 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time, the second-best offensive rating in the league. They did so by absolutely crushing teams on the offensive glass.

The team rebounded 30.8% of their missed attempts - the second-best rate in the league - and averaged 16.2 second-chance points per game. Cleaning The Glass had them as one of the most effective putback teams in the league. They ranked third in putback points per miss metric (24.2) and second in putback plays generated per 100 misses (21.3). Mitchell Robinson is an elite offensive rebounder who ranked in the 98th percentile last season in offensive rebounding rate (17.2%), and Jericho Sims placed in the 88th percentile (12.7%). Players like Julius Randle and Josh Hart also contributed from their positions, which allowed the Knicks to dominate the offensive glass. That strength should remain in place this season.

There are some odd anomalies in New York's offensive production though, and should they fail to replicate their success on the glass it could lead to a big dip in offensive production.

Despite finishing second in offensive rating, this team was somewhat inefficient from the floor. It finished 20th in overall effective field goal percentage (54.3%), and the most efficient area of the floor it shot from was short mid-range (shots 4-14 feet from the basket), and they finished no higher than 19th in shooting percentage from any other area.

In other words, the Knicks relied heavily on their offensive rebounding to produce its offense. It could be argued that a team that relies on efficient mid-range shooting and offensive rebounding could be due for a step back in efficiency the next season, and New York fits those parameters.

Should the Knicks regress on offense, this defense will have to be much better. They allowed 115.3 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time and ended up finishing 20th in halfcourt defensive rating (98.8). Taking this into consideration with their rebounding on defense - New York was 11th in defensive rebounding rate - and the 13.3 second chance points allowed per game, it's pretty clear that opponents were having success on initial shot attempts.

It wasn't all luck though. Once again the Knicks allowed a high rate of wide-open 3-point attempts last season. Opponents averaged 17.8 uncontested looks from beyond the arc per game and shot 38.8% on those shots. Initial success on a possession, coupled with a high rate of uncontested attempts, will equal a below-average defensive rating, and that is exactly what transpired for the Knicks last season.

Improvements on both ends of the floor are needed for the Knicks if they are going to maintain the success they had last season, but none of the improvements needed are ones that are impossible to achieve. They can certainly contend for one of the top four seeds in the Eastern Conference this season.

The real question will be about their ATS and whether or not they can sustain it. New York is always going to be a publicly backed team, and because the bettors were treated so well backing them at the window, it wouldn't be a shock if they start the season as one of the more overvalued teams by the betting market.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

In the aftermath of the Damian Lillard trade to Milwaukee, the Knicks saw their win total jump by a single win to 45.5 at DraftKings. Miami was expected to be a dominant power in the Eastern Conference, but that was dependent on the team acquiring Lillard. Now that he is elsewhere the Heat's win total and projections take a hit, and the ripple effect is an increase in the expectations of the teams around them. The win total is still one that is fewer than New York's final record from last season, so those who believe in the production this team showed in the final 25 games are getting some value here.

The Knicks' schedule is very manageable compared to their conference rivals. New York has the 12th-lowest strength of schedule, according to Positive Residual. It is among the teams with the fewest back-to-backs on the schedule (13) and while they have a negative net rest advantage (-1) they only have nine overall games in which they are at a disadvantage. They are also among the teams that travel the fewest miles this season.

With all of that Under consideration, there is no strong lean toward one direction or the other, but if forced to choose sweating out an Over would be the recommendation here. The conference got weaker at the top, and New York was among the best in the league after acquiring Josh Hart at the deadline. This team won't produce at the 59-win pace it was to end the season, but they should be among the five best in the East without a doubt.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 45.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel

OKLAHOMA CITY

Thunder

NORTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 41-43 SU, 47-35-2 ATS, 47-35-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

98.0 (#17 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Davis Bertans
Victor Oladipo
Usman Garuba
Jack White

Losses

Dario Saric
Jared Butler

NBA Draft

1 (10) Cason Wallace
2 (50) Keyontae Johnson



TEAM PREVIEW

There is no hotter commodity this offseason in the NBA than the Oklahoma City Thunder, and for good reason. The Thunder are 96-66-4 ATS (59.2%) over the last two seasons, and they have one of the best young players in the league in Shai Gilgeous-Alexander on the roster. This season, the betting market is expecting a strong leap into contention for a top-six seed in the Western Conference, and it is hard to argue against such expectations.

First and foremost, the Thunder have the key piece in a burgeoning superstar that is Gilgeous-Alexander. He ranked in the 93rd percentile at his position in points per 100 shot attempts (125.9), the 93rd percentile in offensive efficiency differential (+6.8) and finished fourth in scoring (31.4 points per game).

For a team to contend it needs a ball-dominant star who can score at every level, and Gilgeous-Alexander can do that. He even showed an improved stepback 3-point jumper in the FIBA World Cup, which would be an incredible addition to his offensive arsenal, as he shot just 35.8% from deep last season and only took 10% of his attempts from that area of the floor.

The team also has a brilliant roster of young talent surrounding Gilgeous-Alexander.

Josh Giddey is a brilliant offensive player who averaged 16.6 points, 7.9 rebounds and 6.2 assists in his sophomore season. His efficiency from deep can improve - he shot 32.5% on 3.1 attempts - but he's a great facilitator who can run the offense at an effective level.

Luguentz Dort is an extremely talented defender who can take on the best perimeter scorer on any team in the league, including the likes of Luka Doncic. He is not an insanely efficient shooter, but he shot 39.8% from the corners last season, so teams must account for him as a spot-up shooter.

Jalen Williams emerged as an incredible talent last season as well and pushed Paolo Banchero for Rookie of the Year. He averaged 14.1 points, 4.5 rebounds and 3.3 assists on 52.1% shooting from the floor. Williams also proved to be an effective offensive rebounder who grabbed 3.6% of his teammates' missed shots last season.

There is no denying this roster is laden with talent, and the returns for bettors have been tremendous. So, it is no surprise that this team is favored to make the postseason and has a win total on par with a team like Sacramento that won the third seed in the Western Conference last season. However, it's not a perfect team, and there are some issues the Thunder must figure out if they are to meet the expectations thrust upon them this season.

Oklahoma City struggled to find scoring options outside of Gilgeous-Alexander last season. He led the team with 31.4 points per game but was just one of four double-digit scorers for the Thunder last season. When he left the floor, Oklahoma City went from 117.6 points per 100 possessions to 110.8 and their net rating suffered by 4.2 points per 100 possessions in those minutes.

This team does have concerns on defense as well.

Dort might be an elite on-ball defender, but the team's defensive rating suffered with Gilgeous-Alexander and Giddey on the floor. Giddey in particular - due to his lack of quick-twitch speed and athleticism - was constantly taken advantage of by quicker perimeter players. They allowed 114.5 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time last season, and they allowed the 10th-highest frequency of wide-open 3-point attempts.

Chet Holmgren's presence should help ease some of the defensive concerns, especially regarding rim protection. Holmgren averaged 3.5 blocks in Summer League play and practiced with Team USA as part of the Select Team, which allowed him to work on his game. Oklahoma City desperately needed a center last season, and Holmgren fills a massive need.

Despite the defensive concerns, this team will be extremely productive this season. The concern from a betting standpoint is that the value has been sucked out by the popularity this season. Oklahoma City was able to cover games at such a high rate because they were underdogs in only 32 games in the last two seasons. This season, the percentage of games they will be favored will be much higher, likely leading to a depressed ATS record.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Not only has Oklahoma City cashed numerous tickets at the window, but it has also served those who bet Over its win total in recent years well. The Thunder have gone Over their win total each of the last two seasons, and last year they cashed the Over by the 49th game of the season. However, much like the value potentially being gone on a nightly basis, the value could be gone on this total.

Oklahoma City's win totals in the last two seasons closed at 23.5 and 22.5 respectively. This season, the team's win total is nearly twice as high at 43.5 at DraftKings. This is obviously a massive change from last season, especially for a team that returns largely intact. Is such an adjustment actually warranted?

The Thunder do not have a particularly easy schedule either.

Positive Residual has Oklahoma City with the 13th hardest schedule in the NBA. They have a negative net rest advantage (-2) and 14 back-to-backs on the schedule. Their 12 games with a true rest disadvantage are tied with five other teams as being the second-most in the league as well. For a young team that might not weigh too heavily, but it is an important factor to account for.

As is the overall popularity of this team. It feels as if coming in and betting this team Over its win total at the current number is the epitome of buying at the top of the market. The Thunder will compete for a playoff seed this season, but asking the same team that won 40 games last season to improve by four or more wins in an improved conference does not seem like the right action to take.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 43.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel

ORLANDO

Magic

SOUTHEAST DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 34-48 SU, 45-35-2 ATS, 40-42-0 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

95.0 (#23 of 30)



OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions
Joe Ingles

Losses
Bol Bol

NBA Draft
1 (6) Anthony Black
1 (11) Jett Howard

TEAM PREVIEW

After beginning last season with a 5-20 record through 25 games, the Magic ended up finishing the year at 34-48. That means that Orlando went 29-28 after that lousy early-season stretch, and this team feels like it's very close to playing winning basketball over the course of a full season. In fact, it wouldn't be surprising if it happens this year.

Orlando was just 18th in the NBA in defensive rating in 2022-23. But after those first 25 games, the Magic were sixth in the league in that category. Third-year head coach Jamal Mosley has seamlessly gotten his young team to compete at a high level on that end of the floor, which is never an easy task. And it was only amplified after the slow start.

The Magic now enter the new season hoping to be in the top 10 in defensive efficiency for the entire year. And it shouldn't be all that hard for them to do it. Markelle Fultz is a solid point-of-attack defender, and he's good for a highlight-reel block every other night. Franz Wagner looks like he'll be one of the best multi-positional defenders in the league very soon. And Wendell Carter Jr. is one of the better help defenders in basketball at the center position, even if he doesn't quite rack up blocks. He seems to always be in the right place, and he's better at defending the perimeter than most on switches. With those three in the starting lineup, the team will continue to be tough to score on.

Orlando then has young guys like Anthony Black and Jalen Suggs to disrupt opposing guards. And Jonathan Isaac was one of the more versatile defenders in basketball before injuries derailed his career. If he can come close to returning to full strength, there won't be many members of this rotation that can't hold their own defensively. Even vets like Gary Harris and Joe Ingles know how to hold their own as team defenders.

The question with the Magic is whether they can take a step forward offensively. Only four teams in basketball had a worse offensive rating than Orlando last season, and a big part of the reason for that is that only four teams made fewer 3s per game than the Magic. Jacking up 3s isn't a requirement in the NBA, but teams that don't shoot well from behind the 3-point line put themselves at a big mathematical disadvantage. So, Orlando will be hoping that drafting Jett Howard, who shot 36.8% from deep on 7.3 attempts per game, and signing Ingles, a career 40.8% 3-point shooter, will help with spacing. The Magic are also banking on some of the young guys to continue working on their jumpers.

The bright side for Orlando is that Wagner and second-year forward Paolo Banchero have the goods offensively. They look like one of the league's best young duos and they're going to terrorize opponents for the next decade.

Wagner is a smooth-shooting wing that can handle the ball and he utilizes his length and savvy footwork to get himself to the rim. He averaged 18.6 points per game in 2022-23 and he should hit the 20-point mark this season. Wagner looked like a future star playing for Germany in the FIBA World Cup and he'll now try to carry that momentum into the season. Meanwhile, Banchero averaged 20.0 points, 6.9 rebounds and 3.7 assists per game as a rookie last season. Mosley recently said that the forward is a combination of LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony and Jayson Tatum. Given he's 6-foot-10 with a massive frame and the ability to score and facilitate, it isn't hard to see why Mosley believes that. Banchero is a load to defend in half-court situations, and he's a terror in transition. If the former Duke star ever develops a jumper, then look out.

Fultz is also a player that can be impossible to guard. Sure, his jumper is pretty much nonexistent at this point, but he's a walking paint touch with his ability to attack the rim. That's a luxury that not many teams have at the point guard position.

All in all, the pieces are in place for Orlando to become a top-20 offense this season. And with the way the team defends, that'd likely be good enough for the Magic to be a profitable team to bet on. They were actually 45-35-2 ATS last season, but this year's group has loftier goals. And Orlando also happens to be armed with trade assets, which means the team could potentially upgrade before the trade deadline.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Not only do I like the Magic to go Over their win total this season, but I also think I'd play some alternate Overs on them. You can get Orlando at nearly +200 odds to go Over 39.5 wins this year, and I think 40 wins is well within reason for this team. I'll personally be going up to 40.5 at odds north of +200, and I also like Orlando's odds of making the postseason.

The Magic are one of the best-kept secrets in basketball right now, but it won't be long before casual fans start to realize how good the Wagner-Banchero duo is. And once Orlando arrives, it'll be quite some time before the team is irrelevant again. This team has been openly speaking of its desire to be a top-four seed in the Eastern Conference and I admire the confidence. I'm not quite sure the Magic will achieve that goal, but I do think avoiding the Play-In Tournament is a real possibility.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 36.5

Preview By
Zach Cohen



PHILADELPHIA

76ers

ATLANTIC DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 61-32 SU, 55-38-0 ATS, 49-43-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
101.0 (#7 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Patrick Beverley
Mo Bamba
Danny Green
Kelly Oubre
Javonte Smart
David Duke

Losses

Georges Niang
Shake Milton
Jalen McDaniels
Dewayne Dedmon

NBA Draft

None

TEAM PREVIEW

What in the world should bettors do with the Philadelphia 76ers?

Philadelphia has been the center of turmoil this offseason, and it all centers around James Harden who requested a trade back in June. Since the request, Harden has openly called the president of basketball operations Daryl Morey a liar, and he told anyone who would listen that the relationship between him and the team is all but dead.

This situation becomes even more fascinating now that the smoke has cleared from the Damian Lillard saga, and Harden remains on the team. Morey has played hardball with the likes of Ben Simmons in the past, so it is a safe bet that Harden will be on the team when the season begins. However, how engaged will he be when on the floor?

If this relationship can be fixed, Philadelphia returns one of the best offensive duos in the NBA. When Harden and Joel Embiid were on the floor, the 76ers outscored opponents by 9.2 points per 100 possessions, and the team ranked in the 96th percentile in offensive efficiency (122.4). When Philadelphia ran a pick-and-roll with Harden as the ball-handler and Embiid as the roll-man, they averaged 1.12 points per possession. Those are all statistics that the 76ers can achieve once more if all parties are in.

Those two are also among the best isolation scorers in the league. Philadelphia averaged 1.10 points per possession in Harden isolation plays and 1.07 points per possession in Embiid isolation plays. It's rare to have two players capable of scoring as efficiently when working on their own, but the 76ers have just that on this roster. They also have a solid supporting cast.

Tyrese Maxey has emerged as one of the great young players in the league. Maxey had his most efficient season ever, averaging 121.4 points per 100 shot attempts. He improved the 76ers' net rating by 2.4 points every 100 possessions on the floor. When Maxey was on the 76ers ranked in the 90th percentile in points added per 100 plays in transition (+4.1) and the 95th in transition offensive efficiency (140.0). He's a phenomenal combo guard who can run the show if needed - Philadelphia had a +3.1 net rating when he was at point guard - but thrives when he is off the ball.

Tobias Harris and P.J. Tucker also returned this season which means the 76ers have their starting lineup that outscored opponents by 13.1 points per 100 possessions back together. The front office also did a tremendous job of filling out the rest of the roster behind their starting five.

De'Anthony Melton and Paul Reed are the main returning bench pieces. Among the reserves are newcomers Patrick Beverley, Kelly Oubre Jr., Mo Bamba and Danny Green. It is not a perfect bench by any stretch, but you do have two good backcourt defenders in Beverley and Melton, and a scoring presence - albeit an inefficient one - in Oubre.

The 76ers also figure to be an above-average defensive team once more, as long as Embiid stays healthy. With Embiid on the floor, the 76ers allowed 112.1 points per 100 possessions, compared to the 116.8 they allowed when he was off the floor. He has never been an elite shot blocker, but he is among the best defensive rebounders, allowing the 76ers to snuff out opponent possessions after one miss. Tucker gives them a primary wing defender as well, and with the two guards off the bench, the dropoff on that end of the floor should not be stark when Nick Nurse goes to his reserves.

It will be fascinating to see what the betting market does with Philadelphia this season. If you include the postseason, the 76ers were the best cover team in the NBA with a 54-38-1 ATS record. They were among the best home teams as well, with a 61-32 SU/54-38-1 ATS record at the Wells Fargo Center.

However, the dilemma with Harden looms, and we could see the market try to short the 76ers, with the thought being that the off-court issues bleed into the performance on the court. If Harden buys in and gives Philadelphia a full effort this will be one of the best teams in the Eastern Conference once again, but only time will tell how this works out.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

How in the world could anybody walk up to the counter and bet Philadelphia to go Over its win total? Its win total has not budged since opening at 49.5, but the Under is the favored side for good reason. The top of the Eastern Conference is better now that Damian Lillard is with Milwaukee and Boston has Jrue Holiday. There is also the chance that Harden is not a member of the team after the trade deadline.

As of this point, there are no realistic deals out there for Harden and Philadelphia. Perhaps the team gets involved with Portland to grab Malcolm Brogdon, but he is a downgrade from Harden in almost every facet, save for defense. It would be safe to assume that Harden is on the team, but we have seen him quiet quit on a team in the past, and it wouldn't be shocking to see it happen again.

Philadelphia gets the benefit of a schedule that is not very challenging by Positive Residuals' metrics. The 76ers have the ninth-lowest strength of schedule in the league and a positive net rest advantage (+1). They are also among the 11 teams with only 14 back-to-backs which benefits Embiid who has dealt numerous injury issues the last few seasons.

If everything were copacetic with this roster, this would be a candidate to surpass its win total, but the Harden dynamic brings with it too many variables that could tank the potential of this season.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 49.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



PHOENIX Suns

PACIFIC DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 51-42 SU, 46-46-1 ATS, 47-43-3 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
102.5 (#4 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions	Losses
Bradley Beal	Jock Landale
Eric Gordon	Torrey Craig
Yuta Watanabe	Darius Bazley
Keita Bates-Diop	Bismack Biyombo
Chimezie Metu	T.J. Warren
Bol Bol	Terrence Ross
Jusuf Nurkic	Deandre Ayton
Nassir Little	Chris Paul
Keon Johnson	Landry Shamet

NBA Draft

2 (52) Toumani Camara

TEAM PREVIEW

The trio of Bradley Beal, Kevin Durant and Devin Booker make Phoenix one of the highest-rated teams in the NBA, but in acquiring Beal back in June, the Suns sacrificed nearly their entire roster. Phoenix did well to fill the roster with personnel that fit well around its star trio, but depth is a real question for a team with the third-best odds to win the NBA Finals.

There are those who would argue that depth does not matter in the postseason, but they would be wrong. It also ignores the fact that depth is greatly needed in the regular season, especially when your team is built around players who have a history of missing time.

Beal has played in only 55% of a possible 164 games the last two seasons, and Durant has played in just 58% of contests since returning from his Achilles injury. Booker has had a sturdier health history, but he missed 29 games last season due to a groin injury. If either Beal or Durant misses time, Booker will need to stay healthy, and those depth pieces will need to play bigger roles throughout the regular season, which could lead to a subpar record by betting market standards.

Eric Gordon is a career 37.1% shooter who can defend perimeter scorers, which is something this team will need. Yuta Watanabe is coming off a career-best 44.4% shooting season for Brooklyn, and he has shown in limited minutes that he can be an effective rebounder. Keita Bates-Diop is a well-rounded forward who does a bit of everything on offense from cut, attack off the bounce and run well in transition.

Bettors should factor in the return of Josh Okogie - who posted a career-high in efficiency differential (+4.0) last season - and Damion Lee as well. Lee is an above-average shooter at his position, and the defense statistically improved when he was on the floor. However, Lee is expected to miss a significant amount of time with a meniscus injury.

As far as the core of Durant, Booker and Beal is concerned? It should be very good when they play together.

When Durant and Booker were on the floor together last season the Suns had a +18.4 net rating and averaged 124.7 points per 100 possessions. Now that Beal is in the mix, this offense has the potential to be even better.

Beal is an incredible mid-range scorer who shot 48.9% on 414 mid-range attempts last season. He joins an offense that took 39.1% of its attempts from that area of the floor when the two best players were on. There should be no worry about there being "only one ball to go around" with this offense.

There could be a worry about Beal's production though. As previously mentioned, his availability has been a question. He also regressed to being a statistical negative on defense. Last season the Wizards allowed 1.2 more points per 100 possessions with him on the floor, and he placed in the fifth and eighth percentile respectively in that category in the two seasons from 2019-2021.

Phoenix fixed its issue at center as well with the acquisition of Jusuf Nurkic in the three-team deal that sent Damian Lillard to Milwaukee. Nurkic is a downgrade at center when it comes to athleticism and defense, but there is an upgrade in moving on from a disgruntled player like Ayton. They also added more depth with the additions of Nassir Little and Keon Johnson.

Overall, the Suns are going to be an incredible offensive team this season now that three incredible scorers share the floor. They should also be better defensively than most think. Beal was a positive defender in his early career, Durant is a good defender, and they can roll out defenders like Okogie and Gordon which should make them competitive on that end of the floor. They should be an above-average team on defense this season.

Phoenix will be one of the highest-rated teams by the betting market this season, and the betting public will likely pile onto that rating with nightly action. That would lead one to believe that the Suns are likely going to be a tough team to back ATS throughout the season.

In the eight regular season games Durant and Booker played together Phoenix was 8-0 SU/6-2 ATS. But that is a small sample size, and in the postseason they were 6-5 SU/4-7 ATS. In the series Phoenix won in five games over Los Angeles, it was 2-3 ATS. They were favored before the series with the Nuggets began. This overvalued nature will likely carry over into this regular season, especially in games where all three of their stars play.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

The Suns have the fourth-highest win total on the board at DraftKings; 54.5 shaded to the Over by 20 cents. It is a win total that is attainable should their trio of stars stay healthy in the regular season, but that is not guaranteed for Beal or Durant. Should neither miss extended time, this team could take advantage of a favorable schedule.

Positive Residual has the Suns' schedule ranked ninth easiest in the NBA. They have 10 rest advantages on the schedule to nine disadvantages, and six of those disadvantage spots will be at home. For a team built to have regular season success, this is an opportunity to go Over the win total.

It's obviously hard to project time missed, but if it is only one of Durant or Beal at a time, this team can win a lot of games. Booker deserves more credibility for availability than given by the masses. Should he be able to play about 68 games like he averaged the three seasons prior to last, then this team will be at the top of the standings.

With all of that factored in, this is a win total that comes up as somewhat short. My personal win total for Phoenix came out to be 53.4 wins, meaning there is a small edge on expecting 52 or more wins from the Suns this season.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

OVER 51.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



PORTLAND

Trail Blazers

NORTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 33-49 SU, 39-42-1 ATS, 41-40-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

92.5 (#27 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Deandre Ayton
Robert Williams
Malcolm Brogdon
Toumani Camara

Losses

Damian Lillard
Drew Eubanks
Trendon Watford
Justise Winslow

NBA Draft

1 (3) Scoot Henderson
1 (23) Kris Murray
2 (43) Rayan Rupert

TEAM PREVIEW

Now that Damian Lillard has been dealt to Milwaukee the youth movement can officially begin in Portland. The Trail Blazers have a good stable of young guards, led by rookie Scoot Henderson who will take over for Lillard at point guard. Anfernee Simons and Shaedon Sharpe will round out the backcourt for Portland, which could surprise quite a few teams with the explosive guard play they will be able to provide on a nightly basis.

One would assume that offense would be a strength for the Trail Blazers this season, but the few statistics we have to build on do not paint a great picture.

When Sharpe and Simons were on the floor together without Lillard last season Portland averaged just 110.6 points per 100 possessions, and they had a -7.5 net rating. According to *Cleaning the Glass*, those lineups ranked in the second percentile of percentage of halfcourt plays (84.6%). In other words, they barely ran. When they did run they averaged a measly 107.9 points per 100 plays, and they ranked in the fourth percentile in offensive efficiency off live rebounds (91.4). One would assume with the athleticism of Sharpe and Simons on the floor this young duo would push the pace frequently. That should change with Henderson in the mix.

Henderson was a lethal transition scorer in his time with the G-League Ignite. His game is reminiscent of Russell Westbrook in his prime, and Henderson should push this Trail Blazers team to take advantage of its skills in transition this season. His presence means Simons is pushed over to his more natural position of shooting guard. Simons always ran the point when on the floor with Sharpe, and the result was a somewhat clunky offense. When Simons was at the two-guard the Trail Blazers were only outscored by 0.5 points per 100 possessions and they ranked in the 70th percentile in offensive efficiency (117.2).

If this team can run with more frequency it should be able to mask some of the halfcourt issues that are sure to come with a rookie point guard. Even then, this halfcourt offense should be much better with a guard like Henderson who can drive and dish to shooters.

Simons is a career 38.7% shooter who hit 39.2% of his catch-and-shoot attempts last season. Jerami Grant hit 40.1% of his attempts from deep last season, and has improved as a catch-and-shoot threat throughout his career. Sharpe shot 36.0% on 3.5 attempts per game his rookie season. There is enough on the floor to allow Henderson to work out his own shooting issues, although questions remain about where the shooting is going to come from on this bench.

Should the front office decide to keep their rotation of bigs intact - Ayton and Williams - this could be a much better defensive team as well. Ayton had his worst season as a professional last year in Phoenix, but he has never been a poor rim protector. Williams was in contention for Defensive Player of the Year two seasons ago, and when healthy he can raise the floor of this defense exponentially. He is also a great lob threat to pair with Henderson on pick-and-rolls.

As of Oct. 2 Malcolm Brogdon is still a member of this team, but it is likely that he is flipped for more assets by this front office. There is a case to be made to keep him around though. The bench depth is extremely questionable for Portland as it stands with Brogdon on the roster. There is also a chance Williams is dealt as well, but he is only 25 years old and fits with the timeline of this roster for now.

Rookies like Kris Murray and Rayan Rupert will play roles for this team as it shifts into a full rebuild, and the presence of so many young players will culminate in volatile results. It won't be surprising to see Portland pull some big upsets at home when it catches teams on a west coast road trip this season. It will also make sense when the young Trail Blazers are run out of certain arenas when they hit the road.

Last season Portland was just 39-41-2 ATS and one of the worst teams in the league after it shut down Lillard. They will likely be one of the worst cover teams this season, with some intrigue in certain spots at home throughout the season.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

The last two seasons Portland was focused on taking as many losses as possible in order to maximize its draft position. This season the NBA has established rules about resting healthy players, the team has its future star in Scoot Henderson and a haul of assets after trading Damian Lillard. It is safe to say that bettors should not see the same chicanery from the Trail Blazers' front office this season, but that does not mean this team will be any good.

Aside from being built on a core of players under the age of 25 years old this team could also ship off any of the veteran pieces it has. Malcolm Brogdon is expected to be flipped for assets at some point, and both Ayton and Williams could be assets too, although the reporting around those two has not been as clear. If one or both of those centers is traded this will leave the Trail Blazers with an extremely thin frontcourt, and an even worse defense.

The schedule does the team no favors either. Positive Residual ranks their schedule as the seventh-hardest in the NBA. Portland has a massive rest advantage this season (+5), but the team travels the sixth-most miles due its home location. The future is bright for the Trail Blazers now that Lillard has been dealt, but this team is not done taking its lumps by a long shot. My win total projection for Portland was 23.5 but that is admittedly low, especially when compared to DraftKings opening total of 28.5 win. Still, I believe that to be a high number for the Trail Blazers, who could sell quite a few of these roster pieces before or during the season.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 28.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



SACRAMENTO

Kings

PACIFIC DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 51-38 SU, 50-38-1 ATS, 44-43-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
99.0 (#14 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Chris Duarte
JaVale McGee
Sasha Vezenkov

Losses

Chimezie Metu

NBA Draft

2 (38) Colby Jones
2 (54) Jalen Slawson

TEAM PREVIEW

Sacramento took the NBA by storm last season when it romped through the regular season, won 48 games and took the third seed in the Western Conference. There are many who believe the Kings - after that incredible season - come into this season disrespected by the betting market. They are 55-1 at DraftKings to win the NBA Finals, and their win total of 44.5 is on par with the Timberwolves, Pelicans and Thunder.

It is easy to see why that would be seen as the market shorting a team that was one game away from a berth in the Western Conference semifinals, but it should be stated how well last season went for Sacramento.

First and foremost, the Kings were very fortunate when it came to player health. They lost the fewest games to injury, according to Man Games Lost which tracks win shares lost due to injured players. Their top eight players in terms of minutes played appeared in at least 73 games last season. That is near-perfect injury luck for a team, and it is unlikely it will repeat itself.

Sacramento also consistently came out on top in games that entered clutch minutes — games within five with five or fewer minutes left — and those wins tend to regress by season. The Kings were 25-19 SU in games that entered clutch time, and they outscored opponents by 10.0 points per 100 possessions in those situations. They led the league in overall field goal percentage in clutch time (50.7%), and De'Aaron Fox even won the inaugural Jerry West Trophy which is given to the best clutch player.

If we factor in a regression of both health and clutch wins then it gets you to where the market has Sacramento heading into the season, and should those two things regress to the mean then the Kings will have to deal with having a subpar defense.

Sacramento finished the regular season 25th in non-garbage time defensive rating after allowing 117.3 points per 100 possessions. Despite having the best offense in the league they only had a +2.4 net rating, thus the massive amounts of clutch games. That defense is not going to get much better this season. So if we get the assumed regression in clutch games (of which the Kings played 44), then the case for a slip down the standings becomes even stronger for Sacramento this season.

Their biggest weakness on defense was rim protection, and it stemmed from having weak perimeter defenders without a rim-protecting center. Opponents took 33.5% of their attempts within four feet against the Kings, and on those attempts, they shot 69.0%, according to Cleaning The Glass. In halfcourt settings, Sacramento allowed the third most points per 100 plays (102.0).

Outscoring opponents in one-possession games on a nightly basis might work over the course of a single season, but it generally isn't a recipe for long-term success. Still, this offense will be one of the best in the NBA again next season.

Last season when Fox and Domantas Sabonis shared the floor Sacramento averaged 123.8 points per 100 possessions. That offensive rating ranked in the 97th percentile of lineups, according to Cleaning The Glass, and both their turnover rate (12.2%) and effective field goal percentage (58.2%) with those two ranked in the 92nd and 94th percentile respectively. When Malik Monk was added to the mix, that offensive rating was 131.1 which ranked in the 100th percentile.

All three of those offensive dynamos return this season, as does the vast majority of this offense. That should equate to the Kings once again being one of the best offensive teams in the league, but do not get that twisted with being an Over team.

Sacramento was just 40-39-3 to the Over in the regular season, and much of that had to do with some dramatic home and road splits. At home, the Kings were 27-17-1 to the Over if you include the postseason series with Golden State. However, they were 16-26-2 to the Under on the road, due to a less efficient offense and a much more efficient defense. In fact, they had the eighth-best defensive efficiency away from home this season (113.8).

It seems like an anomaly for a team that is as poor as they are on that end of the floor, but it is something to monitor as we head into the new year.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, the market clearly believes some regression is heading for Sacramento, and it is right to do so. Injury luck, a winning record in clutch games and unsustainable production in clutch minutes are not replicable season-to-season. The Western Conference is also improved, with teams like the Thunder, Lakers and Suns expected to be improved. This should all lead to a decline in the Kings' record. They also have an extremely challenging schedule.

Positive Residual has Sacramento with the third-highest strength of schedule in the NBA. The Kings might have the second-most rest advantages this season, but they have the second-most rest disadvantages as well. They are also among the nine teams with 15 back-to-backs on the schedule, and they must travel the fifth most miles in the league.

Nine of their first 14 games are also on the road, meaning those who like Sacramento's win total to go Over could wait until Nov. 28 when they begin a stretch that sees the team play 10 of 11 games at home.

Having said that, this is not a guide that believes the Kings will have an opportunity to go Over their win total. There are too many signs of regression for Sacramento this season, the schedule is challenging, and the opposition is better. That all should add up to a depressed record for the Kings this season.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 44.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



SAN ANTONIO

Spurs

SOUTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 22-60 SU, 33-49-0 ATS, 48-33-1 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

93.0 (#26 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Reggie Bullock
Cedi Osman
Lamar Stevens

Losses

Keita Bates-Diop
Romeo Langford

NBA Draft

1 (1) Victor Wembanyama
2 (44) Sidy Cissoko

TEAM PREVIEW

There is an entire menu of Victor Wembanyama wagering options offered at DraftKings, so it's safe to say what this entire season will be about when it comes to San Antonio. However, the Spurs have quietly put together a roster that is rife with young talent, and this team could surprise people with its competitiveness this season on a night-to-night basis.

First, we should start with some news about Wembanyama. His role with this team will be fascinating, and it seems that the team wants to roll him out slowly. It has been reported that Wembanyama will play power forward instead of center to limit the wear and tear on his body during his first 82-game season. If that is true, it is a somewhat big deal, especially for those looking to bet some season-long futures on Wembanyama.

For example, DraftKings has Wembanyama at a measly 20-1 to win Defensive Player of the Year. Those who bet into that already do not want him to hear that he is playing the four. Playing center will put Wembanyama in many actions defensively and give him opportunities as a shot blocker. He can certainly help from off-ball, and his length will allow him to be an effective help defender, but any lesser role defensively severely hampers a bet made at an already ridiculously watered-down number.

Regardless of his role, Wembanyama will be a massive addition to a Spurs team that finished last in non-garbage time defensive efficiency by allowing 120.9 points per 100 possessions. Rim protection was one of the biggest issues on that end of the floor. San Antonio allowed the fourth-most attempts within four feet of the basket and allowed opponents to shoot 67.6% on those shots. Even as a help defender, Wembanyama will improve the Spurs's rim defense.

That improved rim defense should lead to an improvement in San Antonio's halfcourt defense which allowed the most points per 100 plays last season (104.8). If that improves, then the Spurs could suddenly look like a competent defensive team themselves, as they finished 13th in opponent points added through transition offense (2.6).

The real question will be how this team improves offensively, but it has the pieces to be much better on that end of the floor.

Devin Vassell and Keldon Johnson both showed some impressive scoring prowess last season. Vassell averaged 18.5 points per game and shot 38.7% on 7.0 3-point attempts per game. Johnson was San Antonio's leading scorer at 22.0 points per game. The duo were two of the Spurs' top three players in usage rate (Zach Collins was second), and both have shown efficiency improvement throughout their careers.

Tre Jones also took a huge step forward last season, posting a career-best +5.0 efficiency differential and helping to improve the Spurs' offensive rating by 3.6 points per 100 possessions on the floor while assisting on 30.5% of the team's made baskets.

Jeremy Sochan is one of the most intriguing second-year players this season. He ranked in the 73rd percentile in efficiency differential (+3.7) and the 91st percentile in offensive rebounding rate (6.3%) as a rookie. His contributions on offense will be limited to transition opportunities and as a finisher, but he is one of the many young and talented players on this roster.

The offense is going to be somewhat clunky for the Spurs, especially if the projected starting lineup is true. Sochan and Wembanyama on the floor together means San Antonio could have two inconsistent shooters together at once. Wembanyama is a versatile offensive big, but he shot just 27.5% from distance last season for Metropolitan 92. He will space the floor because he will take the shots, but shooting could still be an issue for a team that finished 23rd in 3-point percentage (35.5%).

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

San Antonio was one of the primary candidates to tank last season due to the allure of Victor Wembanyama. Now that the French phenom is in silver and black, there is no massive prize to shoot for at the top of the draft. The NBA also implemented its new rules in order to keep teams like the Spurs from resting players at the tail end of the season, so the effort should be there from the front office most of the season.

How the team will handle Wembanyama's workload is a question though. There are already indications that the team wants to ease him into his first NBA season. Whether that is executed via frequent rest or minutes restrictions remains to be seen, but knowing the team's most talented player is due for some sort of limitation is worrisome for those looking to bet the win total Over.

Positive Residual has them with the toughest strength of schedule this season (.527), but much of that stems from a high amount of games at medium to high altitude. They only have 13 back-to-backs, and their net rest advantage is positive (+2), albeit small. Overall, they only have nine games in which they will have a true rest disadvantage.

Win total bettors will have to decide whether this team is capable of improving its record by eight wins this season. That seems like quite the task given what is being reported about Wembanyama and the makeup of this roster. Plenty of veterans on this team will likely be on different rosters once the trade deadline rolls around, and the presence of Wembanyama seems to have inflated some expectations of San Antonio this season. The Spurs should be better ATS this season, but the win total should go Under the posted total.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 29.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



TORONTO

Raptors

ATLANTIC DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 41-42 SU, 42-40-1 ATS, 44-36-3 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating
95.0 (#24 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

Dennis Schroder
Jalen McDaniels
Garrett Temple

Losses

Fred VanVleet
Dalano Banton
Will Barton

NBA Draft

1 (13) Gradey Dick

TEAM PREVIEW

The competitive window is seemingly closing on Toronto, but the front office has been stubborn in accepting the reality of the franchise's situation.

Fred VanVleet left via free agency, and Pascal Siakam and OG Anunoby have contract situations that could end with both doing the same this offseason. Siakam is in the final year of his current deal, and Anunoby has a player option worth just \$19.9 million next season, a number he will easily surpass on the open market. Team president Masai Ujiri could decide to keep both through the trade deadline and risk losing three pieces of a championship team for nothing. Or he could ship both off for assets that change the course of this franchise's rebuild. Either decision will have a massive impact on what Toronto ultimately becomes this season.

The trade deadline is not until February though, so until that time comes this team is still intact and that means analyzing it as currently constructed. The Raptors are a top-heavy team with great potential on defense but seemingly no direction on offense.

Toronto finished last season 12th in non-garbage time offensive efficiency by averaging 115.9 points per 100 possessions. That figure would seemingly undercut my assertion that this team is flawed on that end of the floor, but a simple look under the surface tells us everything we need to know.

The Raptors were just 25th in halfcourt offensive efficiency last season. They averaged just 94.5 points per 100 plays, according to Cleaning The Glass. They circumvented that abysmal rating by relying on offensive rebounding and transition offense. Toronto was third in offensive rebounding rate last season (30.2%), generated the second-most putback points per 100 missed attempts (25.0) and averaged 16.7 second-chance points per game. The Raptors' ability to crash the glass on the offensive end masked many of the issues it had when games would slow down.

They were also a brilliant transition team. Toronto is second in both points added per 100 transition plays (+3.9) and transition frequency (17.6%). It was particularly effective when running off of forced turnovers. The Raptors led the league in defensive turnover rate (17.2%) - the third consecutive year it has done so - and also led the league in points added per 100 plays in transition off steals (2.7).

Being dominant on the offensive glass while using turnovers to generate offense allowed Toronto to finish well above average in offensive efficiency, but it is not a recipe for long-term success. Nick Nurse is also gone, and he was a brilliant defensive coach who schemed up a defense that thrived on creating havoc. Darko Rajakovic, who was a Memphis assistant last season, is an unknown commodity as head coach. There is certainly a reality in which this team is not the same defensive unit it was under Nurse. If those turnovers start to decline then so too could this offense, as it will not be able to generate the same transition opportunities.

The Raptors are also in desperate need of shooting. They were the third-worst shooting team in the league last season (34.1%), and that will not be improving by much this season. Dennis Schroder, Pascal Siakam and Scottie Barnes - all projected starters - are all sub-34.0% career 3-point shooters. OG Anunoby (37.5%) and Gary Trent Jr. (38.4%) are the best shooters on the roster. There is obviously hope that rookie Grady Dick turns out to be a deep threat, but what he will be is currently unknown.

Toronto still has potential on the defensive end - regardless of scheme - due to its personnel. Anunoby is regarded as one of the best individual defenders in the NBA, Siakam has always been a statistical positive on the defensive end, and Barnes has shown real talent on that end of the floor in his young career. Those three alone can raise the defensive floor of this team, but the rest of the depth does have some weak links, which will likely bring down this team's defensive ceiling.

Under Nurse, the Raptors were a highly regarded team by the market, but that respect was too much. They closed as favorites in 51 games last season and went just 24-27 ATS. Judging by the win total this team will be an average team at best when it comes to the market rating, and rightfully so. By the end of the season, that rating could tank, but it all comes down to what happens with Siakam and Anunoby.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Toronto has been in the mix for the likes of Kevin Durant and Damian Lillard the last two seasons, but neither will be donning a Raptors uniform this season. This team has no discernable direction at this point when it comes to the roster and its future. That is why looking at this team Under the win total makes too much sense.

Ujiri has no real haul of assets, and only Barnes and Dick could be considered potential building blocks for the future. In Barnes specifically, they have a player many believe could be the focal point of a championship contender. However, there is not much else on this roster. That is why it would make the most sense to have as many assets for Siakam and Anunoby before they walk for nothing as VanVleet did this past offseason. It is in the franchise's best interest to trade these two before the season ends, and that is what I am banking on.

Toronto has a very average schedule this season. It has 12 games with a true rest advantage and 12 games with a rest disadvantage. The Raptors also only have 14 back-to-backs and travel the second-fewest miles. This win total analysis is all about predicting the front office's decisions, which is a risk but a risk worth taking.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 36.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



UTAH Jazz

NORTHWEST DIVISION • WESTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 37-45 SU, 47-34-1 ATS, 48-31-3 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

96.0 (#21 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions

John Collins
Omer Yurseven

Losses

Udoka Azubuike
Juan Toscano-Anderson

NBA Draft

1 (9) Taylor Hendricks
1 (16) Keyonte George
1 (28) Brice Sensabaugh

TEAM PREVIEW

Utah was a pleasant surprise last season when it got off to a 10-3 start and ultimately surpassed its win total before the All-Star break. As great as the story was though, there were signs that the Jazz were living on the edge, and the team ultimately finished with just 37 wins while looking like one of the lesser teams in the league while doing so.

The Jazz return essentially intact this season - outside of one key acquisition - which begs the question: Will bettors get the team that surprised the NBA, or the team that was 10-19 in its final 29 games with one of the worst net ratings over that span?

To answer that question we need to nail down what we know about Utah, and what we know is this team will be one of the worst defensive teams in the league.

Last season the Jazz gave up 117.2 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time. Their perimeter defense was among the worst in the NBA. Opponents averaged 18.5 wide-open 3-point attempts - defender six feet or further away - per game against Utah. Their perimeter numbers could have been worse had their opponents not shot just 38.1% on those attempts - the 11th best rate in the league - so there is certainly a possibility that this defense looks worse should it allow the same rate of opportunities from distance this season.

There is no reason to believe that will not be the case either. Utah lacks a true defensive option along the perimeter on this roster. Its projected starting lineup of Collin Sexton, Jordan Clarkson, Lauri Markkanen, John Collins and Walker Kessler has only one good defender: second-year center Kessler. The most used lineup combination of Sexton, Clarkson, Markkanen and Kessler averaged an incredible 123.4 points per 100 possessions but still had a -1.6 net rating due to a defense that gave up 125.0 points per 100 possessions on the other end. Collins has been a statistical positive on defense throughout his career, but he is hardly a game-changer on that end of the floor.

There is also a worry that Collins might not be a seamless fit on offense as well.

Utah's offense is predicated on spacing and shooting. The Jazz might have finished 20th in 3-point percentage (35.8%), but that was a symptom of being a high-volume shooting team. They took the fifth-highest rate of 3-point attempts and made the seventh most shots from beyond the arc. Collins is going to play power forward for this team, but his shooting has been steadily declining each of the last three seasons, and it bottomed out at 29.2% last season. Should Collins continue to shoot at a subpar rate, it will greatly affect this team's offense and spacing.

Still, Will Hardy has shown he can coordinate an efficient offense, which should be the case again this season.

Clarkson had a career year as a full-time starter under Hardy. He posted career-highs in scoring (20.8) and assists (4.4) while posting the best points per 100 shot attempts mark he's had (113.4) since playing with LeBron James in Cleveland. Clarkson improved the Jazz's offense rating by 4.7 points per 100 possessions and should be just as effective from a scoring standpoint this season.

Sexton took a step back when it came to scoring - he posted the lowest points per game mark of his career last season - but his efficiency in Hardy's system took a big step forward. He hit career-highs in field goal percentage (50.6%), 3-point percentage (39.3%) and points per shot attempt (122.6).

The same is true of Markkanen, who won Most Improved Player while having a career season in which he set personal bests in usage rate (23.7%), points per game (25.6), assists per game (1.9), field goal percentage (49.9%), points per shot attempt (129.3) and efficiency differential (+10.8).

However, what was something that thrust Utah past preseason expectations last season threatens to cause the team to fall below expectations this season. Can Clarkson, Sexton and Markkanen all repeat their career seasons?

Those career years on offense were still not enough to overcome poor defense, and what will be constant is that lack of defensive prowess this season. Should they all regress - which is likely after such incredible seasons - this team will be hard-pressed to repeat a season in which they finished with the second-best cover rate in the league (58.2%).

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

Utah blew past its win total last season with 37 wins in a season that saw its preseason win total close at 23.5 at most shops. This season's win total is in line with the team that it was last season, but it is a candidate to regress back from where it finished, especially considering the career seasons it took to get to that win total last season. Now, there is a market expectation of improvement for this team, so not only will those players need to repeat those career seasons but they would likely need to improve as well.

The case for the Jazz to go Over their win total begins with their schedule and homecourt. Utah has the second-easiest schedule in the league, according to Positive Residual. Part of that rating comes from having one of the strongest homecourts in the NBA. The Jazz went 23-18 SU at home last season, as opposed to 14-27 SU on the road. They have an even amount of games in which they have either a rest advantage or a disadvantage, but playing at altitude gives them an edge throughout the rigors of a regular season.

Still - even with the strong advantage at home - this is not a team worth backing to go Over its win total. An assumed improvement from a team that got the most of every key player is hard to invest in. Especially in a conference as deep as the Western Conference.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 35.5

Preview By
Jonathan Von Tobel



WASHINGTON

Wizards

SOUTHEAST DIVISION • EASTERN CONFERENCE
2023 RECORD: 35-47 SU, 39-42-1 ATS, 40-40-2 O/U

Steve Makinen's Power Rating

91.0 (#30 of 30)

OFFSEASON RECAP

Additions	Losses
Jordan Poole	Bradley Beal
Tyus Jones	Kristaps Porzingis
Danilo Gallinari	Monte Morris
Mike Muscala	Jordan Goodwin
Patrick Baldwin Jr.	Kendrick Nunn
Ryan Rollins	Isaiah Todd
Landry Shamet	
Taj Gibson	
	NBA Draft
	1 (7) Bilal Coulibaly
	2 (42) Tristan Vukcevic

TEAM PREVIEW

The Warriors pretty much made the decision to give Jordan Poole away, but there are reasons to believe he'll be better in a new situation. Poole, who averaged 18.5 points per game in 2021-22 and 20.4 points per game in 2022-23, no longer has to try to fit in. This will be his show in Washington and that should bring out the best in him offensively — even if he will no longer have the luxury of all-world spacing playing next to Steph Curry and Klay Thompson.

Poole should get his career back on track as more of a main option, and it isn't outrageous to think that he'll flirt with 25.0 points per game this year. The question is whether Wes Unseld Jr. can get him to buy in defensively. A lot of Golden State's key players have openly talked about Poole's lack of commitment on that end of the floor — with Andre Iguodala opening up about it just a few weeks before the start of this new season. If he never gives defense the old college try, the second half of his career will consist of him floating from team to team as a microwave scorer off the bench. And with a roster this low on talent, it's going to be hard to win games if Poole isn't at least trying to play winning basketball.

I'm actually somewhat interested in seeing what a five-man unit with Poole, Tyus Jones, Corey Kispert, Kyle Kuzma and Daniel Gafford looks like. Jones was always a calming presence on both ends of the floor when the Memphis Grizzlies needed him to play big minutes, and he's a good fit next to a guy like Poole. Jones competes hard and focuses on making the right play. The Wizards can use some of that next to the not-so-organized chaos Poole brings to the floor. Meanwhile, Kispert is a marksman from deep, as he shot 42.4% from the outside last year. He's also a good off-ball mover, and he doesn't kill you on the other end of the floor either. As for Kuzma, the small-ball four played his way into a four-year, \$102 million deal last year. He averaged 21.2 points, 7.2 rebounds and 3.7 assists per game last season, and he has really grown into a potent scorer. And Gafford is just a good pick-and-roll big that can finish at the basket and play a little defense. So, that group would have a little bit of everything and could be competitive in spurts.

Washington also has two proven bench pieces in Delon Wright and Deni Avdija. Wright is a sturdy ball handler offensively and one of the league's premier perimeter defenders on the other end of the floor. There's a good chance he'll close out some games for the Wizards, as Unseld could opt to have him defending next to Poole in big moments. And Avdija is a jack of all trades, master of none. He's a guy that can excel in a number of different lineups, as he plays hard on both ends, handles the ball well for a forward and can facilitate a little bit. If his jumper ever ends up coming along, he'll eventually catch on as a starter.

The big question for the Wizards is what they'll get out of second-year guard Johnny Davis and rookie wing Bilal Coulibaly. Davis is a good perimeter defender, but that's all he is at this point. His scoring hasn't translated at all at this level, and he's not going to make much of an offensive impact without significantly improving as a shooter. Meanwhile, Coulibaly is a very raw prospect. He likely has the ability to impact games defensively because of his athleticism, length and ranginess as a 6-foot-6 guard. He also has good instincts on that end of the floor. But his offensive game might take a while to come along, so he likely isn't looking at anything more than 18-20 minutes per game as a rookie.

Overall, Unseld is in an unenviable position with this team. The roster isn't quite barren, but there aren't any All-Stars here. And realistically, guys like Poole and Kuzma are better served as the fourth options on good teams, yet they're thrown into starring roles here. Washington is going to be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to talent on a nightly basis. And having a roster that is something of an island of misfit toys is going to make it difficult for Unseld to impose his will on the team. I'm not exactly sure what style of play would make the most sense with a roster like this offensively. And even if Unseld puts one in place, will it work with gunners like Poole and Kuzma out there?

It's also just hard to ignore the amount of turnover there was with this team from last season to this season. Washington is going to enter this year with very little continuity, which is yet another thing working against them. So, not only is this the roster with the least talent in the entire league, but it's also a group that will be lacking structure and identity.

WIN TOTAL ANALYSIS

I was really tempted to take the Over on this because the number is just so, so low. And the Wizards do have some quality players scattered throughout the rotation. However, these players are going to be learning to play with one another on the fly, which means the early portion of the season could be a bit rocky. And the lack of a true All-Star is going to make it hard for this team to win, even if things start to click.

The reality is that there usually are a few teams that really struggle to win games each season. In fact, there have been at least three teams that have won 24 or fewer games in each of the last four seasons in which a full 82 games were played. And if that trend is going to continue, you'd have to think that the Wizards will be one of the teams that flirts with 20 or fewer wins. When scanning through the entire NBA, there isn't a single team with less talent than Washington.

I also can't get over the fact that the two best players on this roster, Poole and Kuzma, are guys that mostly care about scoring the basketball. Unless they drastically change the way they approach the game, that mentality will likely trickle down throughout the rotation. That is why this is such a bad spot for Unseld. He has a very difficult roster to work with, and most of the blame will unfairly fall on him.

WIN TOTAL RECOMMENDATION

UNDER 24.5

**Preview By
Zach Cohen**

STEVE MAKINEN'S POWER RATINGS

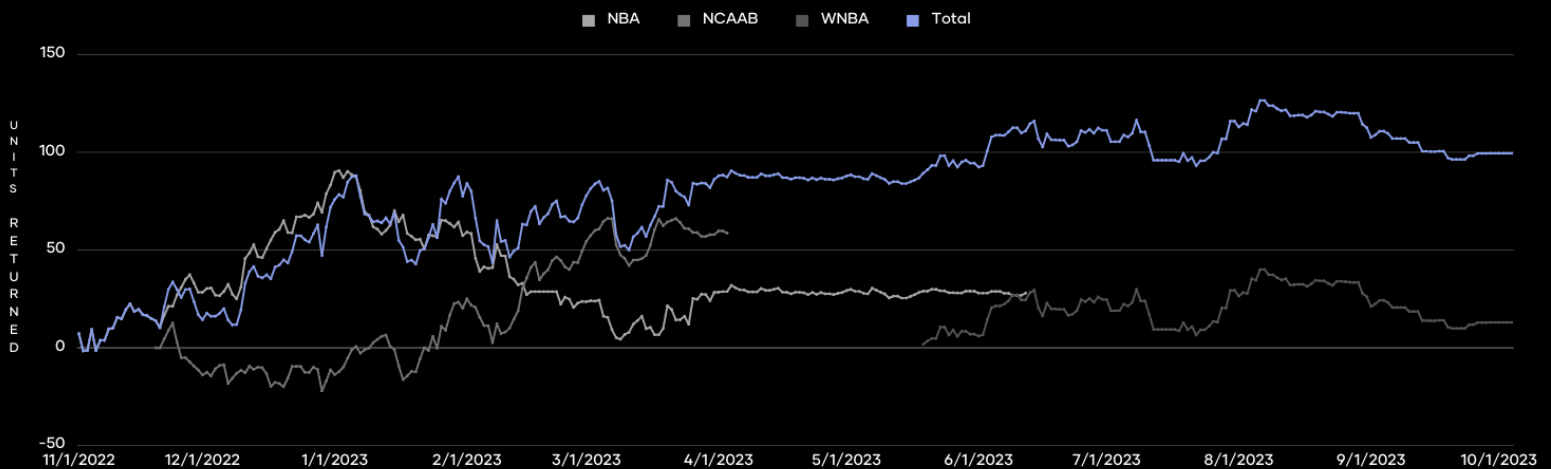
TEAM	POWER RATING
BOSTON	103.5
DENVER	103.5
MILWAUKEE	103.5
PHOENIX	102.5
GOLDEN STATE	102.0
LA LAKERS	101.5
PHILADELPHIA	101.0
LA CLIPPERS	100.5
CLEVELAND	100.0
MEMPHIS	100.0
MIAMI	100.0
NEW YORK	99.5
DALLAS	99.0
SACRAMENTO	99.0
NEW ORLEANS	98.5
MINNESOTA	98.5
OKLAHOMA CITY	98.0
ATLANTA	97.5
BROOKLYN	97.0
CHICAGO	96.5
UTAH	96.0
INDIANA	95.5
ORLANDO	95.0
TORONTO	95.0
HOUSTON	93.0
SAN ANTONIO	93.0
PORTLAND	92.5
CHARLOTTE	92.0
DETROIT	91.5
WASHINGTON	91.0



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