

**VSIN** PRO

# NBA BETTING GUIDE

PRO EDITION



# ALL GROWN UP

OKC FAVORED TO WIN THE WEST AFTER BIG OFFSEASON MOVES

OUR PRO GUIDE INCLUDES

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

**VSIN**



# CONTENTS

## FEATURES

- 3**  
Welcome to the 2024  
VSiN NBA Betting Guide
- 4**  
VSiN Expert Best Bets
- 8**  
Player Prop Betting the  
Smart Way
- 9**  
Rules and Live Betting  
Strategies to Live By
- 12**  
In-Pocket Plays
- 14**  
Steve Makinen's  
Power Ratings

## VSiN STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

**COVER:** James Coleman  
**DATABASE MANAGER:** Jason Latus  
**LAYOUT AND DESIGN:** Matt Devine  
**SENIOR EDITOR:** Zachary Cohen  
**MANAGING EDITOR:** Adam Burke  
**WRITERS:** Kelley Bydlon and  
 Jonathan Von Tobel

## CONFERENCE AND TEAM INDEX

Atlanta Hawks .....	15
Boston Celtics .....	16
Brooklyn Nets .....	17
Charlotte Hornets .....	18
Chicago Bulls .....	19
Cleveland Cavaliers .....	20
Dallas Mavericks .....	21
Denver Nuggets .....	22
Detroit Pistons .....	23
Golden State Warriors .....	24
Houston Rockets .....	25
Indiana Pacers .....	26
Los Angeles Clippers .....	27
Los Angeles Lakers .....	28
Memphis Grizzlies .....	29
Miami Heat .....	30
Milwaukee Bucks .....	31
Minnesota Timberwolves .....	32
New Orleans Pelicans .....	33
New York Knicks .....	34
Oklahoma City Thunder .....	35
Orlando Magic .....	36
Philadelphia 76ers .....	37
Phoenix Suns .....	38
Portland Trail Blazers .....	39
Sacramento Kings .....	40
San Antonio Spurs .....	41
Toronto Raptors .....	42
Utah Jazz .....	43
Washington Wizards .....	44

**ODDS WITHIN GUIDE  
ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

photos by USA Today Sports Images  
 Vecteezy.com

**EASTERN CONFERENCE OVERVIEWS BY ZACHARY COHEN  
 WESTERN CONFERENCE OVERVIEWS BY JONATHAN VON TOBEL**

*MOST OF THE ADVANCED STATS REFERENCED CAN BE FOUND AT  
 DUNKS & THREES AND CLEANING THE GLASS*

The 2024-25 NBA season is just about here and we're approaching it from every angle in the VSIN NBA Betting Guide. This was an eventful offseason, as multiple teams made massive win-now moves to try and prevent the Boston Celtics from winning back-to-back titles. With that in mind, there was a lot to tackle in this thing. As the saying goes, "THIS LEAGUE!"

Last year, readers of this guide were treated to some interesting nuggets and a bunch of winning futures. Hopefully we can guide you towards another profitable season this year. Keep reading for:

- Best bets and futures from Zachary Cohen, Jonathan Von Tobel and Kelley Bydlon
- Strategies for how to attack player props and live betting
- JVT's favorite bets to win the NBA Title
- Eastern Conference team previews from Zach
- Western Conference team previews from JVT
- Power Ratings from VSIN analytics guru Steve Makinen

We are VSIN, The Sports Betting Network, available 24/7 on VSIN.com as well as other audio and video platforms. You can listen to us for free on the iHeartRadio App or watch on YouTube TV as part of the Sports Plus package. Alternatively, you can go to our VSIN Live YouTube page and subscribe to watch for \$3.99/month.

We hope this guide gets you as excited as we are about the upcoming NBA season. Immerse yourself in all of the analysis, and make sure you check out VSIN.com for daily best bets, player props and proprietary trends/betting systems, as well as other in-depth articles as big storylines shake up betting markets.

Also, if you're a hoops junkie then don't go too far away. Our VSIN College Basketball Betting Guide is dropping on October 24! With all of this pre-season content, along with what we're already doing for college football and the NFL, there's no better time to be a VSIN subscriber.

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





# VSIN EXPERT

## BEST BETS

### **KELLEY BYDLON**

#### **VICTOR WEMBANYAMA TO WIN MOST VALUABLE PLAYER (40-1)**

I bet this as soon as the market opened, and it's a bit tougher for me to recommend at 20-1. However, my general stance is that I refuse to miss out on Wemby winning MVP whenever he actually does it. So, I'd probably still take a bit of 20-1. As with any NBA awards or futures, keep in mind that you will have the opportunity to make this bet during the season. So, you might even see a drift in the odds if he and the Spurs don't start off great.

I also like Wembanyama for Defensive Player of the Year, but I am approaching that market with more patience. It's too long of a season to be holding a big -170 ticket.

Another option if you're considering making a Wembanyama MVP bet is to bet the Over on the Spurs alt win total. You can bet Over 40.5 wins at +190 at DraftKings. The Spurs likely have to be in the playoff conversation for Wemby to have a real shot at winning MVP, so they're not that different. You can even make both of those bets.

Realistically, you don't want a Wembanyama MVP ticket if you think this will be a 30-win team. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, in 1976, was the only MVP winner to play for a team with less than 41 wins, and his Lakers team finished with 40 that year.

#### **CADE CUNNINGHAM TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (22-1)**

This is the awards market I've had the most success with over the last 15 years. I think it follows a more formulaic approach each season. Tyrese Maxey ended up being a nice hit last season, and we'll try to go back-to-back with Cunningham in 2024-25.

I don't have as much confidence in Cunningham as I did with Maxey last year, as I rushed to bet the latter when the market opened. But that's mainly because of the rest of the talent on Detroit. Cunningham doesn't have Joel Embiid to help draw attention away, but I do think this Pistons roster has improved from a season ago and could be feisty in the Eastern Conference — especially if we see players like Jaden Ivey and Ausar Thompson take some leaps forward.

Last season, Cunningham averaged 22.7 points, 7.5 assists and 4.3 rebounds per game and shot 35.5% from 3. Heading into his fourth season, if the scoring, 3-point shooting and assists continue to go up, he should be right in this race.

#### **OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER OVER 56.5 WINS (-115)**

The Thunder were incredible last season, finishing tied with the Nuggets for the second-best record in the NBA. They were fairly healthy throughout the season, benefitted from an MVP-like season from Shai-Gilgeous Alexander, had rookie Chet Holmgren make an immediate impact and finished with 57 wins. So, surely we must expect some regression, right? Wrong.

The Thunder were one of the few top teams out West that actually got better this offseason. Adding Isaiah Hartenstein and Alex Caruso is huge. Those were two of the top-five players in Defensive EPM last season. Caruso's presence should take some more defensive pressure off SGA, and Hartenstein adds some needed rebounding and depth down low. In my opinion, the Thunder are the team to beat out West this season. And I like them to win 57 or more games.

#### **BROOKLYN NETS UNDER 19.5 WINS (-105)**

I mean...this is just an awful roster at this point. I'm not saying it will be a flat out tanking season from the start, but with Cooper Flagg headlining the draft class, it might turn into that as the trade deadline approaches. That's especially true with this team having some pieces that contenders could be interested in adding as the playoffs approach.

## ZACHARY COHEN

All of Zach's Eastern Conference win total best bets are labeled as "bets" in the team previews.

### ANTHONY DAVIS TO WIN MOST VALUABLE PLAYER (150-1)

Like Kelley, I also jumped on Victor Wembanyama to win MVP at 40-1 odds. However, I'm also taking a flier on Davis.

I'm aware that this is the ultimate dart throw. Davis rarely plays enough games to warrant MVP consideration. But Davis did play 76 games a year ago, and he's in great shape right now. Also, new Lakers head coach JJ Redick is really empowering Davis as an offensive player. He wants Davis to let some 3s fly this season, and he also wants Los Angeles to run some offense through him. Taking that into consideration, I wouldn't be surprised if we see a career year from Davis, who is also one of the game's elite defenders. And if Los Angeles is able to avoid a Play-In spot and make the playoffs outright, Davis could be a part of the conversation. The Lakers brand doesn't hurt either.

### STEPHON CASTLE TO WIN ROOKIE OF THE YEAR (10-1)

The Rookie of the Year race feels open heading into this season. Zaccharie Risacher, the first pick in the draft, is viewed as a bit of a project. So, it's hard to imagine him immediately coming into the league and making a massive impact. And Alexandre Sarr, the second pick, had one of the worst Summer Leagues in recent memory. That's why Zach Edey, an NBA-ready center that could average a double-double, is the betting favorite. And Reed Sheppard is second on the list after he set the Summer League on fire. However, my money is on Castle.

Last year, Castle averaged 11.1 points, 4.7 rebounds and 2.9 assists per game as a key part of a Connecticut team that won the NCAA tournament. The 6-foot-5 guard is an elite perimeter defender, a good playmaker and a dangerous slasher. He also understands how to play off the ball, despite not having a reliable 3-point shot. All of those skills should be useful in San Antonio this year.

While the Spurs added Chris Paul in the summer, Castle should play a good amount of minutes as a rookie. Gregg Popovich said that Castle can comfortably play point guard, shooting guard and small forward, leaving him with a lot of hats he can wear on this team. And with Devin Vassell set to miss the early portion of the season, San Antonio could lean on Castle immediately.

I just don't think it's crazy to expect Castle to average double figures in scoring, and if he does that and plays winning basketball then that could be enough for him to make a run at this award. Also, we have seen young players thrive next to CP3 in the past. Paul played a big role in the development of Shai-Gilgeous Alexander. I can see the veteran rubbing off on Castle in a big way.

### JOSH GIDDEY TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (15-1)

A lot of people ripped Chicago for moving Alex Caruso for Giddey in the offseason, and I was originally down on the trade. However, I have warmed up to it quite a bit, especially looking at how Giddey will be used on this Bulls team. Unlike Oklahoma City, Chicago has a need for what Giddey can do as a high-usage on-ball creator. He has thrived in that role before, and you only have to go back to 2022-23 for a season in which Giddey put up some big numbers. That year, Giddey averaged 16.6 points, 7.9 rebounds and 6.2 assists per game, and he did it with a usage rate of 23.9%. Last year, that usage rate dipped to 22.3% and the Australian was often standing in the corner.

This year, the Bulls are starting Giddey at point guard, which is his natural position. While he might look more like a forward, he's a natural playmaker and he'll be at his best running the show. That was the role Giddey played for Australia in the Olympics, where he averaged 17.5 points, 7.8 rebounds and 6.0 assists per game over four games. Those were also 40-minute games, and the defense was a lot better in that international competition.

With a usage rate that is closer to 30.0% than 20.0%, as well as a supporting cast that is filled with shooters and scorers, Giddey could average career-highs in points and assists per game. And Chicago is a team that has some sleeper appeal. That makes Giddey the exact type of player that you want to target in a market like this.

### MIKE BUDENHOLZER TO WIN COACH OF THE YEAR (22-1)

#### BILLY DONOVAN TO WIN COACH OF THE YEAR (150-1)

Budenholzer is a two-time Coach of the Year (2015 and 2019), and he won a championship with the Bucks in 2021. The 55-year-old now takes over a Suns team that people don't think very highly of. Phoenix is rarely talked about as a true contender, and a lot of people took shots at the Suns after they got swept by the Timberwolves in the opening round of last year's playoffs. But with that negativity comes opportunity for Budenholzer.

If the Suns earn home-court advantage in the first round of the postseason, Budenholzer will likely get a lot of credit — especially considering his fingerprints are expected to be all over the offense. Phoenix plans on shooting more 3s in 2024-25, and that could lead to the team finishing inside the Top 5 in adjusted offensive rating. If the Suns are elite offensively and don't take a major slide defensively, look for Budenholzer to get a lot of love.

With Donovan, I just can't help but think that Chicago is going to overachieve this season. The Bulls are putting a lot of faith in Giddey as a playmaker, but we have seen him thrive in that role before. Giddey is also surrounded by shotmakers, and I like the group that Chicago will be bringing off the bench. So, with so many miserable teams in the East, I'd be surprised if Donovan doesn't put out a decent product this season. And it probably wouldn't take much for him to earn significant praise around the league. If the Bulls win 40 or more games, he'll be considered a miracle worker. I don't think that mark is as unrealistic as it seems. So, at 150-1, why not throw a tiny little something on this?







### **PHOENIX SUNS OVER 46.5 WINS (-115)**

I jumped on the Over at 46.5 as soon as it came out, and it's now up to 47.5 in most places. But there's still a 46.5 out there. I love the Over on either number and I also would look into plus-money odds on the Suns to win 50+. For as much as it might have felt like the sky was falling last season, Phoenix still won 49 games and avoided the Play-In Tournament. The Suns did that despite not getting many games with Devin Booker, Kevin Durant and Bradley Beal together. They also did it with no point guard, no backup center and an ancient approach on offense. That changes in 2024-25.

The Suns had the fifth-highest turnover percentage (15.0%) in basketball last year, and many thought that the team needed to add a point guard. Well, the Suns were able to get Tyus Jones on an absolute steal of a contract. Jones once looked like he'd get at least \$10 million per year, but Phoenix got him on a veteran's minimum. Jones is one of the best passers in basketball, he can knock down open 3s and he rarely turns the ball over. The same can also be said for Monte Morris, who will be the Suns' backup this year. Phoenix should now have an elite assist-to-turnover guard on the floor at all times, and that will make life a heck of a lot easier on the three scorers.

At the backup center spot, the Suns swapped out Drew Eubanks for a proven veteran in Mason Plumlee. Phoenix also has rookie Oso Ighodaro for some small-ball looks. Ighodaro is very athletic, has a high motor and is a good playmaking hub. Neither one of those players will stand out each and every night, but Eubanks stood out for the wrong reasons.

Then there's the offense. Phoenix was at a huge mathematical disadvantage last season, as the team was second in the league in mid-range frequency (34.9%) and 19th in 3-point frequency (35.0%). The Suns will likely be back in the Top 10 in mid-range frequency, as Booker and Durant love that area of the court. But Phoenix is going to let more 3s fly. The Suns shot just 32.6 3s per game in the regular season last year, and that number went down in the playoffs. But there has been some talk about Phoenix trying to get closer to the 40 range in nightly 3-point attempts. The Suns have openly acknowledged that the best teams in the league get up a ton of triples, and they don't want to harm themselves any longer.

If Phoenix was able to win 49 games with so many clear issues last year, why won't they win 48 or so with a much better roster and approach? I actually think there's a decent chance the Suns finish right behind the Thunder in the Western Conference standings.

### **DENVER NUGGETS UNDER 52.5 WINS (-132)**

The Nuggets didn't feel that losing Kentavious Caldwell-Pope would close their championship window. Denver is confident that Christian Braun is ready for a bigger role, and the team is banking on some growth from guys like Julian Strawther and Peyton Watson. The Nuggets also added Russell Westbrook, who will be given a big green light off the bench. However, I view the loss of Caldwell-Pope as a massive one. Last year, Denver was just 25th in the league in made 3s per game (11.7). Losing a spot-up shooter of Caldwell-Pope's caliber isn't going to help there. The big guard was also a huge part of the reason that the Nuggets were ninth in the NBA in adjusted defensive rating.

On top of that, Jamal Murray hasn't looked like himself in quite some time. Murray was bothered by a calf injury in last year's playoffs, averaging just 20.6 points and 5.6 assists per game on 40.2% shooting from the floor and 31.5% shooting from 3. Murray then struggled to make an impact for Canada at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Murray is only 27 years old, so it's not like he's washed up. He should eventually get this sorted out. But if it takes him some time to get going, it's hard to imagine Denver rattling off wins at a high clip.

I'm also a little nervous about the amount of basketball that some of these guys have played. After losing to the Timberwolves in last year's playoffs, Mike Malone said that his players were fatigued. Well, Nikola Jokic, the most important player on this team and the best player in basketball, didn't take much time off. He went and played for Serbia in Paris. And Murray, who clearly could have used a bit of a break, also played over the summer.

I'm not completely out on the idea of Denver being a good postseason team, but I don't see the Nuggets hosting their opening-round series. A lot of teams in the Western Conference have gotten better. Denver is one of the few that is visibly worse on paper.

## JONATHAN VON TOBEL

All of JVT's Western Conference win total best bets are labeled as "bets" in the team previews.

### CHARLOTTE HORNETS OVER 29.5 WINS (-125)

Since winning 43 games in the 2021-2022 season, Charlotte has won 48 games over the last two seasons. One of the reasons the Hornets have struggled so much is the lack of availability of LaMelo Ball, who has played 58 games in the last two campaigns. Ball has committed to wearing ankle braces in order to combat frequent ankle injuries. If he is going to play a majority of games, the ceiling for this team is high. Brandon Miller had a strong, if not quiet, rookie campaign. He averaged 17.3 points and shot 37.3% from beyond the arc. Additions like Josh Green will help this team on defense, and head coach Charles Lee's scheme will bring up the floor of that unit. This is a team that pushes for more than 30 wins this season.

### WASHINGTON WIZARDS UNDER 20.5 WINS (+105)

Washington does have some talent in Jordan Poole, Kyle Kuzma and Malcolm Brogdon. However, two of those three – Kuzma and Brogdon – should be in different uniforms by the time the trade deadline comes around. This roster should be stripped down to the studs by the end of the season, and young players like Bub Carrington, Bilal Coulibaly and others should be getting a vast majority of minutes. Head coach Brian Keefe is a good guy to have on the bench, but this team is so devoid of real talent and the little it has will be gone by the time February rolls around.

### PHOENIX SUNS TO WIN 55+ GAMES (+700) & PHOENIX SUNS TO WIN NBA FINALS (30-1)

I'm lumping these plays together because the analysis all ties together. Phoenix should be much better this season. The Suns made a great hire at head coach in Mike Budenholzer, and they upgraded the roster. Tyus Jones is a perfect fit for the hole Phoenix had at point guard. Monte Morris and Mason Plumlee are solid additions to a bench that had some big flaws last season. Budenholzer should get this team to take a more analytical approach on offense, with an emphasis on increasing their shooting volume. This team won 49 games last season with Bradley Beal playing in just 53 games. They are better than they were last season, and if Beal is healthier this team will threaten to win 55 or more games and the NBA Finals.

### ALPEREN SENGUN TO WIN MOST IMPROVED PLAYER (100-1)

Sengun finished third in Most Improved Player voting last season, so we know he is on the radar of the voters. Sengun is the Rockets' best offensive player. He averaged 21.6 points, 9.3 rebounds and 5.0 assists last season. Entering his fourth season, he is on track to win this award, as he has improved statistically each season. He is also following a similar path as the reigning MIP winner Tyrese Maxey, who just won it in his fourth season. At the price, adding Sengun to start the season is worth it. He could have a 20-point, 10-rebound season while being the focal point of an offense which desperately needs the boost.





# PLAYER PROP BETTING THE SMART WAY

By Zachary Cohen

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

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

## LEARN FROM THE GAME SPREAD/TOTAL

The first thing I do when beginning to look for props is look at the spreads and totals for the day's slate. If a game has an extremely high total, you're likely going to have a chance to cash some Overs on points and assists. 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 Wizards had the lowest rebound percentage in basketball last year. Knowing that helps you look to Washington's opponents as potential Over bets on rebound totals. Meanwhile, the Jazz happened to have the highest turnover ratio in

basketball last year. That 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 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. That's a tool 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 at the NBA's "potential assists" numbers. I think this is an even better way of approaching assist props than by looking at assists per game. It's just so important to be betting on players that consistently put their teammates in good positions to score. When combining potential assists with a weak opponent and a game in which both teams play at a fast pace, you're going to have a good chance of hitting your assist Overs. This is one of my favorite angles on the player props market. 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

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. 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 and extremely difficult to hit. You're better off being consistent and earning small profits over an extended period of time.



# RULES AND LIVE BETTING STRATEGIES TO LIVE BY

By Kelley Bydlon

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

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

## RULES TO LIVE BY

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

I think people often force in-game bets if they enter games looking for action. You should enter each game with a specific strategy in mind and be on the lookout for the opportunities that will offer you a good time/price to jump in live. Simply put, those opportunities 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. Those are 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

### **1. IT'S ALL ABOUT SHOOTING PERCENTAGES**

Even if it's a game you didn't have plans to bet, some opportunities will present themselves that you just can't pass up. Let's say Team A is favored by 5 pre-game and is down 12 in the middle of the second quarter. You check the box score and see that Team A is shooting 39% from the field and 18% from 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 5-point-favorite at a much better number.

### **2. OKAY, 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 3PT percentages at different points in a game. However, these percentages usually regress to near a team's average by the end of a game. So, if you see a game with outlier shooting percentages on one side, or both, look to capitalize on it with a bet.

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

Let's say both teams start out shooting poorly from 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.

### 4. TIMING IS CRUCIAL

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

### 5. KNOW WHEN STAR PLAYERS TAKE THAT FIRST BREAK

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

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

You'll often say that every week during football season with not much you can do about it. Well, in the NBA that's what I would call a 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.

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

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

### 8. OH SWEET, BEAUTIFUL MIDDLES

These aren't for everybody, and it's not even something I dabble in as much as I used to, but there's nothing quite like the feeling of having +points with both teams and the game falling right in the sweet spot. Of course, this is not something you can do with every game, but maybe you bet a big dog 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.

### 9. 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.





## THE OFFICIAL BANK OF VSIN



CREDIT CARD DESIGNED  
FOR GAMING AND SPORTS  
FANS EVERYWHERE!

**EARN 1%**

CASHBACK REWARDS ON  
GAMING AND SPORTS APP LOADS<sup>1</sup>

**EARN 2%**

CASHBACK REWARDS ON  
ALL OTHER ELIGIBLE PURCHASES

FOR MORE INFO & TO APPLY

**[VSIN.COM/GBANK](https://vsin.com/gbank)**

TERMS AND CONDITIONS APPLY

<sup>1</sup>Gaming Transactions are those Lottery Tickets, Casino Gaming Chips, Off-track Betting, Wagers and gambling transactions submitted by a merchant using Merchant Category Code (MCC) 4829, 6051, 7800, 7801, 7802, 7995. Merchants are assigned an MCC based on the merchant's primary line of business. We do not determine which MCC a merchant chooses to classify itself.

Minimum Finance Charge: \$1.50; Annual Percentage Rate APR for purchases: 20.49% to 28.49% variable; APR for cash advances: 29.99% variable; Cash Advance Transaction Fee: Either \$10 or 3% of the amount of each cash advance, whichever is greater; Foreign Transaction Fee: 3% of each Purchase or Cash Advance transaction in U.S. dollars; Annual Fee: None. 2% Cash Rewards are earned for every \$1 spent in net purchases (minus returns and credits), and 1% Cash Rewards are earned for every \$1 spent on Gaming Transactions. ATM transactions, cash advances of any kind, balance transfers, cash equivalents such as money orders and prepaid gift cards, wire transfers, fees or interest posted to a linked account, including but not limited to returned payment fees, late fees, and monthly or annual fees, do not earn cash rewards.

Cards are issued by GBank, Member of FDIC, pursuant to a license from Visa U.S.A. Inc. Visa and Visa Signature are registered trademarks of Visa International Service Association and used under license. All other trademarks and service marks belong to their respective owners. The holder's use of this card constitutes an agreement to the Terms and Conditions in the Cardholder Agreement.

VSIN, the Sports Betting Network, is a third party sports media company and is not owned by or affiliated with GBank





# IN-POCKET PLAYS

**GRAB YOUR TIMBERWOLVES,  
BUCKS AND SUNS TICKETS NOW**

By Jonathan Von Tobel

The NBA season is a long and arduous journey. Injuries can obviously derail a season, and teams don't find their stride until late in the year. Those ebbs and flows lead to opportunities in the futures market. Dallas is the perfect example.

At the beginning of February, the Mavericks were 26-23 and 18-1 to win the NBA Finals. They ended the season on a 24-9 SU and ATS run over the last 33 games. Dallas was +700 by the time the postseason began, and found themselves in the NBA Finals. The team ended up losing, but a bettor with that 18-1 ticket in pocket was in position to make money when the Finals began.

That type of run is generally why I like to wait to add championship or conference futures to my portfolio until the season begins. The market reacts to injuries and losing streaks. It is also slow to react to new data. For example, I added Minnesota to win the Western Conference at 30-1 at the end of October last year.

Having said that, it does not mean there is no point in adding championship futures before the season begins. Teams – like Boston – can certainly go wire-to-wire throughout a season and never see a playable dip in their odds. It also benefits a bettor to buy on a team it believes to be undervalued before the season begins. If they are right, the value of that ticket will only grow as the season goes along.

So, as we do every season in the NBA Guide, here are my three favorite championship futures to add before the season begins.

## **MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES (12-1)**

Karl-Anthony Towns is now on the Knicks, but the Timberwolves are not worse today than they were with him. Naz Reid is a perfect replacement for Towns and the numbers bear that out. With Towns as the power forward next to Rudy Gobert, Minnesota outscored opponents by 9.2 points every 100 possessions. Its net rating with Reid in that spot was +8.4. And Reid is just as effective from distance as Towns.

The additions of Julius Randle and Donte DiVincenzo give the Timberwolves some much-needed depth. Randle can play the four, with Reid at the five, which gives this team some unique lineup versatility. Oh, and they still have the best two-way player in the league in Anthony Edwards and one of the best wing defenders in Jaden McDaniels.

The Northwest division is also a joke at the bottom and the Nuggets could take a step back this season. It is setting up for a strong season once again for Minnesota.

## **MILWAUKEE BUCKS (14-1)**

Last season did not go well for the Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard pairing. However, this price is not the price bettors were getting when that trade was made. Milwaukee was as short at +400 to win the Finals when the season began last year. It didn't hit 14-1 until the first round, when Antetokounmpo was lost to injury. Now, we're getting that price with the Bucks before the season begins.

There were some positives in a hectic campaign for Milwaukee last season. With Lillard and Antetokounmpo on the floor, the Bucks outscored opponents by 10.2 points per 100 possessions and ranked in the 96th percentile in offensive efficiency (124.1). The team also showed some improvements on defense after the All-Star break.

There are some injury concerns once again. Khris Middleton is not healthy to start camp and offseason addition – and expected starting shooting guard – Gary Trent Jr. suffered an elbow injury in the first preseason game. But, this team overall should be better in the second season of this experiment, and we are buying low.

## **PHOENIX SUNS (30-1)**

Phoenix was included in this article last season, but the Suns disappointed. However, after seeing the offseason this team had, I am ready to be hurt once again.

It cannot be overstated how much better Phoenix will be with the addition of Mike Budenholzer as head coach. By all accounts, the Suns are going to utilize the 3-point line more than they did last season. That is evidenced by their first preseason game in which they attempted 39 3-point shots. Phoenix ranked 25th in 3-point attempts per game last season (32.6) despite ranking fifth in accuracy (38.2%). This team is already great on offense, but could be even better with a more analytical approach.

The Suns did a great job in adding what they could in the offseason. The big prize was Tyus Jones, who will run the point for Phoenix. Jones has ranked in the 89th percentile or higher in his last three seasons in assist-to-usage rate. He's ranked in the 84th percentile or better in overall assist rate. He fills a massive hole for the Suns. Backup center is also much stronger with the addition of Mason Plumlee. Phoenix should be a dominant regular season team under Bud, and this number should shrink as the season goes along.

# STEVE MAKINEN'S POWER RATINGS

TEAM	POWER RATING
BOSTON	104.0
OKLAHOMA CITY	103.5
NEW YORK	103.0
DENVER	102.0
PHILADELPHIA	102.0
DALLAS	101.5
MINNESOTA	101.5
MILWAUKEE	101.0
PHOENIX	100.0
CLEVELAND	99.5
INDIANA	99.5
ORLANDO	99.5
MEMPHIS	99.0
NEW ORLEANS	99.0
SACRAMENTO	98.5
GOLDEN STATE	98.0
LA LAKERS	98.0
MIAMI	98.0
HOUSTON	97.0
LA CLIPPERS	97.0
SAN ANTONIO	96.5
ATLANTA	96.0
TORONTO	95.0
CHICAGO	94.5
CHARLOTTE	93.5
UTAH	93.5
DETROIT	93.0
PORTLAND	92.0
BROOKLYN	91.5
WASHINGTON	91.0



# ATLANTA HAWKS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHEAST  
2023-24 RECORD: 36-47 SU, 29-54 ATS, 46-35-2 O/U

The Hawks had to choose between Trae Young and Dejounte Murray this offseason. The two just never clicked, which isn't surprising given their repetitive skill sets.

Atlanta's net rating in 2023-24 was -1.6. However, with Young on the floor and Murray off, the Hawks had a net rating of +3.1 and their 122.1 points per 100 possessions put them in the 92nd percentile of all qualified lineups offensively. That was better than lineups with Murray on and Young off.

All of that, combined with what Young means to the franchise, was enough for the Hawks to give their three-time All-Star a seventh season with the team. Young's lack of a robust trade market didn't hurt either. Things can change quickly in the NBA. If things go south, Young and the Hawks can still part ways. But for now, Atlanta is looking to build something sustainable around the 25-year-old.

The project starts with Zaccharie Risacher, who Atlanta drafted with the first pick in the 2024 NBA Draft. Risacher is years away from reaching his full potential, but he can be a serviceable 3-and-D option right now. Last year, Risacher was the 2024 EuroCup Rising Star, as he averaged 11.1 points per game and shot 38.7% from deep for JL Bourg. Risacher also took on the toughest wing assignments on defense, and he did so in a competitive league. Quin Snyder's team was 27th in the league in adjusted defensive rating last season. So, if Risacher is defending, there will be minutes for him.

Atlanta is also going to take a stab at developing Dyson Daniels. Daniels was the eighth pick in the 2022 NBA Draft, but the Pelicans couldn't give him the type of minutes he needed. The Hawks shouldn't have that problem. Daniels is a good secondary playmaker, a high-level wing defender and an improving shooter. He played good two-way basketball for the Australian national team in the Olympics, and Snyder should be excited about getting his hands on him.

The Hawks will also be banking on some internal development for Jalen Johnson, Onyeka Okongwu and Kobe Bufkin. Last season, Johnson averaged 16.0 points, 8.7 rebounds, 3.6 assists, 1.2 steals and 0.8 blocks per game. He has legitimate All-Star potential and should be viewed as untouchable as Atlanta looks to figure out its future. Okongwu also played rather well last season, averaging 10.2 points, 6.8 rebounds and 1.1 blocks per game in 25.5 minutes per game. Atlanta could look to start him over the aging Clint Capela. Meanwhile, Bufkin might have trouble carving out a role, but the lefty is a creative on-ball player and competes on defense. There's a good player in there somewhere.

Atlanta also has proven role players in Bogdan Bogdanovic, DeAndre Hunter and Larry Nance Jr. Bogdanovic is a microwave scorer and perennial Sixth Man of the Year candidate. Hunter is a good spot-up shooter and uses his big frame to compete defensively at both forward spots. And Nance is an undersized center that plays hard on both ends and always seems to produce, even if it never looks pretty.

Given Young's ability to be the engine of elite offenses, the Hawks should be in the Play-In picture in a weak Eastern Conference. Before finishing 11th in adjusted offensive rating last season, the Hawks were Top 10 in aORTG in three straight years. Atlanta should flirt with that again — especially with Snyder having upped the team's 3-point rate from 33.1% in 2022-23 to 40.8% last year. This team has shooters, guys that can run and players that understand their roles. They should also be a bit better defensively, especially on the perimeter. The Hawks had the third-worst 3PT% defense on non-heaves last season. That's bound to change with more size and length in the rotation.

Where things go from here depends on how quickly some of the young guys develop. The Hawks are semi-competitive right now, but that's not enough for Young. He's going to want to see whether or not Risacher, Okongwu and Bufkin can help him and Johnson compete in the Eastern Conference sooner rather than later.

## OUTLOOK

**The Hawks went Under last year's 42.5 win total, but they did win 36 games. That would have been good enough for Atlanta to hit the Over on this year's number, and that was with some overlap between Young and Murray. Considering last year's On/Off splits, the Hawks should be solid with just Young, plus an improved group of role players. Atlanta also won't be chasing Cooper Flagg, as the Spurs have their first-round pick in 2025. That alone helps when looking at a lower win total like this one.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN OVER 35.5**

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
**600-1**

CONFERENCE  
**160-1**

DIVISION  
**11-1**

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
**+170/-210**

# BOSTON CELTICS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: ATLANTIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 80-21 SU, 52-44-5 ATS, 51-50 O/U

A lot was made of Boston's favorable path to the NBA Finals last year. However, what truly matters is that the Celtics enter this season as defending champions, and it's hard to argue they aren't deserving. Boston finished first in the NBA in net rating (+10.8), first in adjusted offensive rating (122.0) and second in adjusted defensive rating (111.2) last season. The Celtics were nearly flawless, winning 64 games in the regular season and handling their business with ease in the playoffs. They were historically dominant all year, which is why they're understandably the betting favorites to win back-to-back titles.

The Celtics retained all of their key players from last year's squad. Jayson Tatum, Jaylen Brown, Kristaps Porzingis, Jrue Holiday, Derrick White and Al Horford are all back, along with bench contributors like Payton Pritchard, Sam Hauser, Luke Kornet and Xavier Tillman.

The only real concern heading into this season is Porzingis potentially missing the first half due to an injury that required surgery after last year's playoffs. While Porzingis played through the injury in the Finals — the medical staff didn't think he risked further damage — he eventually needed surgery. The Celtics will undoubtedly miss his two-way presence. Last season, Porzingis averaged 20.1 points, 7.2 rebounds and 1.9 blocks per game while shooting a career-high 51.6% from the field. His floor spacing (37.5% from 3) and shot-blocking were key assets for the team.

With Porzingis sidelined for a couple of months, it's tough to envision the Celtics matching last season's win total or advanced stats profile. However, Boston is still capable of elite play without him. The Celtics went 31-6 in games Porzingis missed last season, and the team remains a force with Horford and Kornet stepping into larger roles. Holiday and White still form the best defensive backcourt in the league, and no team boasts a better two-way duo than Tatum and Brown. When you combine those strengths with Joe Mazzulla's innovative coaching, Boston maintains a significant advantage on most nights.

Offensively, Mazzulla's system relies heavily on 3-point shooting. The Celtics play a five-out offense, meaning every player on the floor can knock down open shots — and they're not shy about taking them. Last season, Boston led the NBA in 3-point rate, attempting triples on 43.7% of their possessions, and they ranked second in 3-point accuracy, hitting 39.3% of their non-heave attempts. This team can break games wide open with its shooting, and that perimeter threat creates a lot of isolation space for players like Brown and Tatum, who are three-level scorers.

Defensively, Boston excels at guarding the 3-point line, forcing opponents into taking shots the Celtics themselves avoid. They defend the corners particularly well, with only one team allowing a lower shooting percentage on corner 3s. Boston was also fifth in rim defense, holding opponents to 63.6% shooting at the basket — an area where Porzingis' absence will be felt. He was an elite rim protector last season.

Ultimately, there's no reason to view the Celtics any differently this year. As long as Porzingis doesn't suffer any setbacks, they remain the team to beat in the Eastern Conference. The Sixers, Knicks, Bucks, Cavaliers and Magic will all have a say, but until someone knocks off this version of Boston, the road to the Finals runs through Beantown. If you want to temper expectations for the Celtics during the regular season due to Porzingis' absence, that's understandable. But don't expect any struggles to last. This team will be firing on all cylinders when it matters most, and last year's title run only made Boston more dangerous. The Celtics now have championship DNA.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

+310

CONFERENCE

+155

DIVISION

-145

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-10000/+2500

## OUTLOOK

**I wouldn't be surprised if the Celtics have the best record in the Eastern Conference this season. This team won 64 games last year and took home the 18th NBA Championship in franchise history. However, with Porzingis likely to miss a couple of months, along with several conference foes pushing the chips in this summer, it's hard to expect 59 wins out of Boston. Even some of the non-contenders in the East will be tougher on a night-by-night basis. So, I'd suggest going Under on this win total, but the Celtics can still accomplish all of their goals in the long run.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 58.5**



# BROOKLYN NETS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: ATLANTIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 32-50 SU, 34-46-2 ATS, 40-42 O/U

The Nets are as live as anyone in the Cooper Flagg sweepstakes. Brooklyn was 32-50 in 2023-24 and traded Mikal Bridges, the team's best overall player, to New York for a boatload of picks. The Nets still have some veteran pieces in place, as Nic Claxton, Dennis Schroder, Ben Simmons, Cameron Johnson and Dorian Finney-Smith will all start the year in the rotation. However, Claxton is the only one that could have a future in Brooklyn, as the Nets signed the 25-year-old to a four-year, \$100 million deal in the offseason. The others will be shopped throughout the season.

Johnson will be a hot commodity on the trade market, as he's a 6-foot-8 wing that shoots just about 40.0% from 3 and has a pretty reasonable contract. He'll contribute quite a bit as long as he's with Brooklyn.

One of the big focal points of this season will be learning whether or not Cam Thomas will be part of the next era of Nets basketball. Thomas is just 23 years old and is coming off a season in which he averaged 22.5 points per game on 44.2% shooting from the floor, 36.4% shooting from deep and 85.6% shooting from the line. The 6-foot-3 guard is a microwave scorer, and there aren't many players in the league that can create offense for themselves as easily as he can. However, Thomas has to prove that he can play winning basketball. He has improved a little as a playmaker, as his assist percentage jumped from 12.7% in 2022-23 to 15.7% last season. But he needs to continue to show an interest in getting teammates involved, and he also has to improve his effort on the defensive end. If he can, he can be a high-level starter in this league.

It'll be interesting to see what new head coach Jordy Fernandez can do with Thomas, as well as some of the other young players on this Brooklyn team. Fernandez was an assistant with the Nuggets from 2016 to 2022, and he was then the associate head coach for the Kings from 2022 to 2024. He's viewed as one of the brightest offensive minds in the league, and he has played a role in the development of guards like Jamal Murray and De'Aaron Fox. Perhaps Fernandez can add Thomas to the list.

The other players that are worth looking at this season are Day'Ron Sharpe, Noah Clowney and Dariq Whitehead. Sharpe averaged 6.8 points and 6.4 rebounds per game last season. Brooklyn used a first-round pick on him in 2021, but he hasn't shown much in parts of three seasons. He's a bit undersized for a center, and he's not athletic or skilled enough to play the four. Sharpe's best path forward is as a high-motor spark off the bench. Clowney is a little more interesting. He's a 6-foot-9 forward with impressive touch on offense, and he's also a good shot blocker on the other end of the floor. It'll also be intriguing to see how Whitehead is treated. Whitehead was the second-ranked player in the 2022 ESPN 100, but he had a rough freshman season at Duke and has been hampered by injuries early in his career. But he's a talented shot-making wing and the Nets might not want to give up on him.

Another key project in Brooklyn will be establishing an identity and putting good habits in place. One thing that could change immediately is Brooklyn's pace. The Nets were just 25th in the league in pace of play last season, but the Kings were in the top half of the league in every season in which Fernandez was on the sidelines. Brooklyn might not have the personnel to play quite as fast as Sacramento did, but Fernandez will likely want his team to get into the offense faster than it did last season.

Ultimately, this will end up being a pretty poor basketball product for a majority of the season. The Nets are at a huge disadvantage in the talent department, and they don't have much of an incentive for winning. However, the future in Brooklyn might not be as bleak as it seems. The Nets play in a desirable market, have a lot of salary coming off the books soon and should have a ton of high draft picks coming their way.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
1000-1

CONFERENCE  
600-1

DIVISION  
600-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
+3000/-20000

## OUTLOOK

**The Nets might be a little more competitive than expected early in the season. They have some competitive players scattered throughout the rotation, and Fernandez is a good coach that will have his team buying in early. However, it's still hard to suggest backing the Over on Brooklyn's win total. The Nets are one of the few teams that desperately want to be picking early in the 2025 NBA Draft. They're going to sell off some of their best players and do what they can to finish near the bottom of the standings. Knowing that, how can you confidently bet on their season-long success?**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 19.5**





# CHARLOTTE HORNETS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHEAST  
2023-24 RECORD: 21-61 SU, 33-47-2 ATS, 42-39-1 O/U

In 2022, the Hornets finished with a 43-39 record and made the Play-In Tournament, thanks in large part to LaMelo Ball playing 75 games. The team ranked ninth in the NBA in adjusted offensive rating that season, and Ball's fun, uptempo brand of basketball made Charlotte unique. However, in the past two seasons, Ball has only appeared in 58 games due to injuries.

If Ball stays healthy, the Hornets could once again compete for a Play-In spot, though that's undoubtedly a big "if." But Ball will reportedly wear ankle braces this season, which is a good start. Ball suffered three ankle injuries in 2022-23, so he realizes he needs to try something.

Despite his limited playtime in 2024, Ball posted the highest EPM of his career at +3.2, which placed him in the NBA's 93rd percentile. His stats last season (23.9 PPG, 8.0 APG, 5.1 RPG), and really all throughout his young career, show he can be the engine of a great offense.

Ball's strengths include his exceptional passing and consistent 3-point shooting, which he has maintained despite a significant increase in volume. If he can improve his finishing as a driver, he could be an All-NBA player.

Defensively, Ball needs to recapture his 2022 form, as he posted a -0.2 Defensive EPM. That number is far from impressive, but Charlotte will be fine defensively as long as Ball isn't killing his team on that end of the floor. New head coach Charles Lee will play a crucial role in guiding Ball and the rest of the team.

Lee, 39, has already made a name for himself as an assistant for two championship teams: the 2021 Bucks and 2024 Celtics. Both teams were Top 10 in the NBA in both offensive and defensive efficiency, and Lee's experience should help foster a winning culture in Charlotte. His leadership and attention to detail make him a promising fit for this Hornets roster, which isn't in as rough of shape as you might think.

Lee is also very in tune with the modern style of basketball. Last year's Celtics shot more 3s than any team in the league, and Lee understands the importance of that shot. That alone will be big for a Hornets team that was just 16th in the NBA in 3PT frequency (35.9%) and 22nd in 3PT shooting (36.1%) in 2023-24. Perhaps the shots won't fall right away, especially given the look of this roster. But Charlotte's shot profile will be a lot healthier from Day 1.

One player to watch this year is second-year forward Brandon Miller, who averaged 17.3 points, 4.3 rebounds and 2.4 assists as a rookie while shooting 44.0% from the floor and 37.3% from 3. Miller is a smooth three-level scorer, and with Ball setting him up, he's only going to get better. Lee could also help Miller become a more effective wing defender, building on his length and willingness to compete.

Mark Williams is another player that should thrive in a better overall environment. The 22-year-old rim runner is an ideal pick-and-roll partner for Ball and a very impressive rim protector. However, he needs to stay healthy after appearing in only 19 games last season. He really sprained his foot and missed time in training camp, but it doesn't seem like an injury that will bother him once the real games start.

Miles Bridges, despite being a polarizing figure, remains a key player. Last year, he averaged career highs in points (21.0) and rebounds (7.3) per game, though his shooting percentages dropped, and his defense was a mess. But the team having real aspirations to compete could light a fire under Bridges, who has proven he is capable of being a two-way contributor.

The Hornets also boast decent rotation pieces in Grant Williams, Josh Green, Tre Mann and Nick Richards. Williams, who spent four years in Boston, brings floor spacing, good decision-making and leadership to the team. Green, acquired from the Mavericks, is a 3-and-D player with athleticism. Mann is a dynamic ball handler with an elite ability to create space, though he still needs development. Richards, a high-energy backup center, averaged 9.7 points, 8.0 rebounds and 1.1 blocks last season and stepped up when Williams was injured.

First-round pick Tidjane Salaun is another intriguing prospect. At 6-foot-9 with a 7-foot-2 wingspan and a solid jumper, Salaun has the tools to develop into a very good player, though he needs time to refine his skills.

With a new head coach, a balanced roster and low expectations, the Hornets could surprise some people this season. The young guys will just need to listen to Lee and be willing to battle on the defensive end on a nightly basis. Without a pretty big defensive turnaround, Charlotte isn't going anywhere. But this team has the right pieces and system to be good enough on that end of the floor, and the goal within the organization is to be competitive immediately.

## OUTLOOK

**I love the Hornets to go Over 29.5 and I'm also going to put a little something on them to win 35+ games at +245 odds. I'm aware this is essentially a bet on Ball's health, but I'm fine with that. Players generally figure out how to stay healthy eventually, and Ball seems like he's willing to make some changes in order to get there this season. If he plays a decent number of games, this could be the most improved group in the league.**

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
1000-1

CONFERENCE  
500-1

DIVISION  
55-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
+500/-750

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
BET OVER 29.5

# CHICAGO

## BULLS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: CENTRAL  
2023-24 RECORD: 40-44 SU, 41-41-2 ATS, 47-37 O/U

DeMar DeRozan, who made two All-Star Games in three seasons with the Bulls, is now playing for the Kings. Chicago, in turn, seems to be acknowledging that it's not a contender anymore, though everybody outside of that front office could have told you that. The Bulls didn't get the draft capital many expected for Alex Caruso, opting to trade the All-Defensive guard for Josh Giddey instead of picks. However, at just 21 years old, Giddey represents a small shift toward prioritizing the future.

Chicago also took on a bit of a project in drafting Matas Buzelis, a top prospect from last year's G League Ignite team. Buzelis is very talented, but he needs a lot of work. But while these moves signal baby steps in the right direction, the Bulls aren't likely to find themselves at the very bottom of the NBA standings this season.

DeRozan's absence will be felt, especially in crunch time, but the Bulls still have Zach LaVine and Nikola Vucevic. Say what you want about them, but LaVine can still put up 25 points per game, and Vucevic remains a versatile scorer who dominates the glass. It's hard to imagine the Bulls completely bottoming out with those two playing significant minutes, especially under head coach Billy Donovan. Donovan, who has never won fewer than 31 games, even in the COVID-shortened 72-game season, knows how to keep teams competitive.

The Bulls also have some promising young talent around LaVine and Vucevic. Giddey, Coby White and Patrick Williams are likely to join them in the starting lineup, and all of them have some game. Giddey, a big point guard with elite court vision, should thrive with the on-ball opportunities he'll get in Chicago. He only fell out of favor in Oklahoma City because the emergence of Shai Gilgeous-Alexander made it hard for the franchise to play Giddey on the ball. With his shaky outside shooting, Giddey isn't useful if he's not running an offense. White, meanwhile, averaged 19.1 points and 5.1 assists per game last season and has emerged as a flamethrower along the perimeter. Williams, though injury-prone, is a versatile 6-foot-7 forward who shoots nearly 40.0% from 3 and is a strong defender across multiple positions.

If this is indeed the starting lineup, Chicago's offense could exceed expectations. The bigger concern will be defense. The Bulls are likely to rank in the bottom third of the league in adjusted defensive rating. However, that won't necessarily ruin their chances of hitting the Over on their win total or sneaking into the Play-In Tournament.

Donovan also has a solid bench unit at his disposal. Buzelis, while raw, brings athleticism, scoring potential and energy that will be exciting to watch. Lonzo Ball, once one of the NBA's best two-way guards, is also part of this mix. Though Ball hasn't played since the 2021-22 season due to complicated knee surgeries, he claims to be feeling good and could provide a boost in limited minutes. He'll likely share the court with Ayo Dosunmu, another guard who competes hard on both ends of the floor, making opposing backcourts uncomfortable. Torrey Craig adds toughness as a 6-foot-7 forward who takes pride in getting stops and isn't a terrible 3-point shooter. Lastly, Jalen Smith, a surprise signing, has shown flashes of potential as a stretch big and could offer Chicago a solid 20 minutes a game.

People have been quick to write this Bulls team off, but you shouldn't expect this group to be in the running for the top pick in the 2025 NBA Draft. In fact, get used to Chicago hanging around on a nightly basis.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

1000-1

CONFERENCE

250-1

DIVISION

250-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+700/-1200

## OUTLOOK

**This just isn't as bad of a team as people think it is, and that's not going to change until guys like LaVine, Vucevic and Ball aren't around anymore — and all of them are going to be very difficult to trade. That said, you might as well take advantage of them being around. Based on this team's win total, Chicago will be undervalued in the market. So, not only should you be looking to go Over 27.5 wins, but the Bulls could also be a profitable ATS team this year. And I'm sprinkling some alt totals with them.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**BET OVER 27.5**





# CLEVELAND CAVALIERS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: CENTRAL  
2023-24 RECORD: 53-41 SU, 44-47-3 ATS, 46-47-1 O/U

Cleveland has been a strong regular-season team for the past three years, but playoff success hasn't been there. That's part of why the Cavaliers decided to move on from head coach J.B. Bickerstaff. Kenny Atkinson, most recently an assistant with Golden State, is now tasked with helping this team break through. Atkinson did good work as head coach of the Nets from 2016 to 2020 and has been patiently waiting for the right opportunity — while learning from Steve Kerr, one of the league's best coaches. While he passed on other coaching jobs, Atkinson jumped at the chance to lead the Cavaliers.

One of the first things Atkinson will bring to Cleveland is a fresh approach to the offense. Under Bickerstaff, the Cavaliers relied heavily on isolation and pick-and-roll plays, often resulting in players standing around. Atkinson's motion offense emphasizes off-ball movement, quick decisions and a read-and-react style. He wants everyone involved and he wants the ball to zip around the court. But that doesn't mean Donovan Mitchell and Darius Garland won't have the freedom to isolate or run pick-and-rolls with Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen. Those actions will just come later in the shot clock, as Atkinson prefers to see if the team can find an easier shot first.

Mitchell should have no problem adjusting. The five-time All-Star can put up 30 points and five assists in any system and remains one of the league's most potent offensive players. Garland is similarly adaptable, though Atkinson may push him to take more 3-pointers. This system is also likely to empower other players. Keep an eye on Max Strus, who thrives as a movement 3-point shooter. He stands to benefit from the new offense after an up-and-down first season in Cleveland.

One of the season's primary goals will be unlocking Mobley's offensive potential. There were some raised eyebrows around the league with Mobley signing a five-year, \$224 million extension after the playoffs, but that contract was a bet on the big man's upside. Already one of basketball's top defenders, Mobley is a strong rim protector with excellent footwork for his size. But there's room to grow on offense. He's a better shooter than many realize and will work on extending his range to the 3-point line. Mobley can also handle the ball and is a decent passer. If Atkinson can help him take a leap offensively, the hire will be a success. With Allen as a rim-running center, the Cavaliers need Mobley to become more dynamic.

Beyond Mobley's development, Cleveland needs better luck with injuries. Last season, the Cavaliers struggled to keep their core four — Mitchell, Garland, Mobley and Allen — on the floor together. Mitchell missed 27 games, Garland 25 and Mobley 32. Allen was the only consistent presence, but even he missed most of the postseason. Role players like Caris LeVert, Isaac Okoro and Dean Wade also dealt with injuries.

Atkinson also needs to do his best not to mess up the defense. The Cavaliers were consistently excellent on that end of the floor under Bickerstaff. Fortunately for Cleveland, it's hard to struggle on that end of the floor with Allen and Mobley lurking in the paint.

If the Cavaliers can stay healthy, they should be in the mix for 50 wins and will be a tough out in the playoffs. Still, there's a sense that something is missing. Mitchell, while incredible in many ways, may not be good enough to lead a title contender, and Garland and Mobley have yet to prove they can be the second options on a championship team. So, even if Atkinson's changes are positive, Cleveland remains a second-tier team in the Eastern Conference with little on the horizon to change that.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

60-1

CONFERENCE

22-1

DIVISION

+250

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-900/+600

## OUTLOOK

**In my Knicks preview, I noted that I like the Under on their regular season win total but believe they can contend in the Eastern Conference. Well, I have the exact opposite view of the Cavaliers. This Cleveland team should once again be a fantastic regular season squad, but there isn't much upside here. That won't change until the Cavaliers make some moves to balance out this roster a little bit, and that move is probably finding a taker for Allen. However, I am interested in seeing what Atkinson can do with Mobley. If Mobley becomes a star, the Cavaliers' long-term outlook becomes much better.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN OVER 47.5**



# DALLAS MAVERICKS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 63-41 SU, 60-42-2 ATS, 46-58 O/U

A run to the NBA Finals was not enough for the Mavericks. After losing to the Celtics in five games, the Dallas front office went into the offseason with the objective of improving. Klay Thompson was the big fish landed, but the team also added to its depth with the signings of Spencer Dinwiddie and Naji Marshall among others. The core of this Western Conference champion remains, and this team is primed to make another run at a title this season.

The addition of Thompson is an incredible fit for this team. Part of the reason why the Mavericks fell short was the lack of consistent shooting on the floor outside of Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving. P.J. Washington and Derrick Jones Jr. were largely ignored by Boston on defense, and it caused some real issues with Dallas' offense. Now, Thompson replaces Jones in those situations. The four-time champion is a career 41.7% shooter who hit 38.7% of his 3-point attempts last season. He shot 38.1% on catch-and-shoot attempts. Next to Doncic and Irving, Thompson should have plenty of opportunities.

Having said that, this team does have some questions. The primary issue could be the defense. Yes, the Mavericks were one of the best defensive teams down the stretch last season, but Jones was a big part of that as a primary defender. He is now in Los Angeles. Neither Doncic or Irving are good defenders, and Thompson is no longer the defender he once was. Washington is a fine defender, but he will have a lot on his plate on that end of the floor considering the make up of this roster. Do not forget that Josh Green is gone as well, so Jason Kidd does not have the same plus-defender to bring off the bench any more. Rim protection should be solid with the tandem of Dereck Lively and Daniel Gafford back at center.

The bench seems fine on paper, but there is not much scoring punch. Dinwiddie averaged just 10.5 points in 76 games between his time with the Nets and Lakers last season. Dante Exum figured to play a big role once again, but he is dealing with a serious wrist injury. Quentin Grimes could give Dallas some good minutes in the backcourt. Kidd will stagger both Irving and Doncic so the Mavericks do not play large stretches without one of their stars, but it is hard to get excited about the reserve unit, especially at guard.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

10-1

CONFERENCE

+475

DIVISION

+115

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-525/+380

## OUTLOOK

**Dallas could enter the season as one of the more overvalued teams in the NBA. It finished the regular season 24-9 SU and ATS in its last 33 games, and it made a run to the NBA Finals. The team also added a big name in the offseason in Thompson. As a result, the market expectations are high. The Mavericks have the fourth-highest win total in the Western Conference and they are tied with the Nuggets for second in odds to win the conference. There are no massive schedule concerns – they only have 13 back-to-backs and a -1 net rest advantage – but the rating that this team carries is a touch too high by my measure.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 49.5**

# DENVER NUGGETS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: NORTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 64-30 SU, 43-49-2 ATS, 39-51-4 O/U

Denver's title defense ended earlier than most thought it would: in the Western Conference semifinals. Now a year removed from a championship, the Nuggets have a different look, and that could be the difference between them and the other elite teams in the West.

The biggest change for Denver comes in the backcourt. Kentavious Caldwell-Pope is now in Orlando. Christian Braun is his presumed successor at shooting guard, but Julian Strawther could steal the spot in camp. Regardless of who wins the job, he will have big shoes to fill.

With Caldwell-Pope at the two guard, Denver had a +10.5 net rating. He was their primary perimeter defender and a lethal shooter who knocked down 39.7% of his catch-and-shoot 3-point attempts. Braun shot 37.7% on such attempts, but he only averaged 1.5 per game. Strawther shot 29.8%.

Whomever wins the job will need to replicate those shooting numbers. One must also assume that Denver's defense declines with a primary defender like Caldwell-Pope on the move.

Caldwell-Pope's departure also means the Nuggets' depth takes another hit. He is the second key piece lost from the championship team from 2023 and one of the Nuggets' biggest problems could be its bench.

In the minutes without Nikola Jokic on the floor last season, Denver had a -11.1 net rating and averaged only 105.6 points per 100 possessions. Where does the production come from when Jokic is on the bench?

Russell Westbrook was brought in to come off the bench. While he performed better than most would give him credit for last season – he averaged 11.1 points, 5.0 rebounds and 4.5 assists and the Clippers were +1.9 in his time on the floor – he is still not the solution to this problem for the Nuggets.

As it stands, Denver's primary bench pieces are Westbrook, Strawther, Peyton Watson and Dario Saric. Watson showed some real growth last season. He played 80 games and averaged 6.7 points, 3.2 rebounds and 1.1 blocks per game. His per 36 line – 12.9 points, 6.2 rebounds and 2.1 blocks – was that of an effective role player. The Nuggets are really banking on his and Strawther's development in order to solidify this bench.

Regardless, Denver still has Jokic and the newly extended Jamal Murray, along with Aaron Gordon.

With those three on the floor last season, the Nuggets outscored opponents by 13.5 points every 100 possessions. They ranked in the 99th percentile in offensive rating (126.9). Filter out the Caldwell-Pope minutes and this trio was +15.8 per 100 possessions.

This will still be one of the best teams in the Western Conference, as long as those three remain healthy. Specifically, if Jokic remains healthy. With that in mind, that is also what makes this team vulnerable.

Denver looks top-heavy on paper. There is a reality in which Braun thrives in his new starting role, and young pieces like Watson and Strawther continue to positively develop. But, there is also a reality in which they don't.

## OUTLOOK

**Denver has increased its win total every season since the 2019-2020 campaign. Last year, the team made a concerted effort to push for a top seed, and it ended up with a 21-6 run over the final 27 games. But, many in Denver believe that led to the early exit in the postseason. With a thinner team and much tougher conference around them, the Nuggets should see a small decline in their regular season success.**

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
**+950**

CONFERENCE  
**+450**

DIVISION  
**+300**

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
**-1200/+700**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**BET UNDER 51.5**

DETROIT  
PISTONSDETROIT  
PISTONSCONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: CENTRAL  
2023-24 RECORD: 14-68 SU, 39-41-2 ATS, 40-41-1 O/U

The Pistons were hoping some of Monty Williams' Suns magic would rub off on their young, talented group, but the fit wasn't right. In reality, the roster was probably a lot further from respectability than the front office thought. Williams only lasted a year, despite signing a record-breaking six-year, \$78.5 million deal. Considering Detroit finished 27th in adjusted offensive rating and 25th in adjusted defensive rating, it's hard to argue Williams deserved more time. But his fate was sealed when the Pistons brought in Trajan Langdon as president of basketball operations.

Langdon understandably wanted his own head coach, and he chose J.B. Bickerstaff, who led the Cavaliers to the playoffs the last two seasons. Bickerstaff has some question marks when it comes to his postseason coaching, but he's a proven regular season leader. His competitiveness should rub off on this moldable, young group.

Bickerstaff's first task will be improving Detroit's shot profile. Last year, the Pistons were third in mid-range frequency (34.0%), but only 18th in mid-range accuracy (42.6%). That's not going to fly in today's NBA. For comparison, Bickerstaff's Cavaliers had the lowest mid-range frequency (25.6%) in the league last season and were seventh in 3-point frequency (39.0%), while Detroit ranked 29th (32.7%).

Expect a lot more 3-point attempts in the Motor City this season, and the roster they've built around Cade Cunningham reflects that. Cunningham, a jumbo playmaker who averaged 22.7 points and 7.5 assists per game last season, has never had the luxury of being surrounded by enough shooting. But players like Malik Beasley, Simone Fontecchio and Tobias Harris could change that. Beasley and Fontecchio both shot over 40% from 3 last season, and Harris has been flirting with that mark for most of his career. Cunningham is also a good 3-point shooter himself, so we could see lineups with three or more players spacing the floor at all times.

The Pistons also hired Fred Vinson, arguably the best shooting coach on the planet, to help develop some of their younger, non-shooters like second-year forward Ausar Thompson and rookie Ron Holland II. Both have unteachable talent and athleticism on the wing and the potential to be All-Defensive Team players. If Vinson can get their shots right, Detroit has an insanely bright future. Vinson was successful in fixing a lot of broken jumpers in his time in New Orleans, so there's no reason to doubt him.

Off the bench, Detroit has some real depth. Veteran sharpshooter Tim Hardaway Jr. (career 36.0% 3PT) joins promising youngsters like Marcus Sasser and Isaiah Stewart. Sasser is a smart decision-maker who can hit the 3, and while he's undersized for an NBA guard, he competes his tail off on defense. Stewart, meanwhile, is a physical presence as an undersized center and has developed into a reliable floor spacer (38.3% from 3 last season).

Jaden Ivey, the fifth pick in the 2022 draft, is another interesting piece. He averaged 15.4 points and 3.8 assists per game last season, but his efficiency hasn't been there since entering the league. Maybe Bickerstaff, who has worked with Donovan Mitchell and Darius Garland, can help him take a step forward in his third year. Ivey is explosive off the dribble and can handle the ball, with flashes of shooting and playmaking ability. He's far from a lost cause and will have this season to prove he belongs in Detroit's core. A little more effort on defense wouldn't hurt either, especially since Bickerstaff emphasizes that side of the ball.

Speaking of defense, the Pistons have to be better this year. Bickerstaff's Cavs were Top 10 in adjusted defensive rating the last three seasons, and they were first in 2022-23. His system should spark a big defensive improvement for Detroit, but how much they improve will ultimately determine how this season goes.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

1000-1

CONFERENCE

600-1

DIVISION

400-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+1100/-2500

## OUTLOOK

**Cunningham is a special player with his size and ability to run an offense, and the supporting cast around him has improved drastically. Last year, Cunningham was playing with a really miserable group of wings. This year, the team has some adults in the room, and there are real reasons to buy into the improvement of some of the young guys. Detroit has invested a lot in its developmental coaching staff. Considering all of that, I'd be surprised if the Pistons turn in yet another embarrassing season. I like the Pistons to flirt with 30 wins.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

LEAN OVER 25.5



# GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: PACIFIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 46-37 SU, 42-39-2 ATS, 41-42 O/U

All things must come to an end and that is the case for the Warriors this season. Klay Thompson is now in Dallas and the last vestiges of a once dominant franchise – Stephen Curry and Draymond Green – remain in San Francisco, hoping to spark one last run.

After a disappointing season that ended with a blowout loss to Sacramento in the Play-In Tournament, Golden State's front office went to work this offseason. Gone are Thompson and Chris Paul. De'Anthony Melton, Buddy Hield and Kyle Anderson were acquired in order to give this team more reliable depth. What remains is a team with very solid depth, but some questions as to how effective the sum of the parts can be.

The key components of this team are Curry and Green. When those two shared the floor last season, Golden State outscored opponents by 6.2 points every 100 possessions. Curry had one of the worst shooting seasons of his career, but he still hit 40.8% of his 3-point attempts and averaged 124.6 points per 100 shot attempts. Green was still a top-tier defender and improved the Warriors' defensive rating by 5.9 points every 100 possessions on the floor. As long as those two are healthy – a big if for two players who have regularly missed time the last few seasons – Golden State will be a competent team.

Who plays around those two is the biggest question lingering around this team.

Melton and Hield are candidates to take the shooting guard spot, as is second-year guard Brandin Podziemski. Melton and Podziemski shot 35.3% and 35.8% on catch-and-shoot 3-point attempts last season, so Hield might be the better fit. But his shooting might be a better weapon off the bench. Kevon Looney and Trayce Jackson-Davis will compete for the starting center spot next to Green.

The small forward spot is one of great intrigue. Andrew Wiggins is coming off the worst year of his career. He shot 45.3% from the floor and 35.8% from 3-point range. In his time on the floor, the Warriors' net rating worsened by 6.2 points every 100 possessions. Jonathan Kuminga is coming off a career year. Unlike Wiggins, Kuminga improved Golden State's net rating by 2.0 points every 100 possessions. He is also in the final year of his rookie deal and is set to be a restricted free agent next summer. It makes all the sense in the world that his role is even larger this season.

Golden State was a high-volume shooting team which finished 10th in non-garbage time offensive efficiency (117.8). That shooting should still be a strength this season. Hield is a great replacement for Thompson. Melton is a career 36.9% shooter who should fit nicely in this offense as well.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

35-1

CONFERENCE

17-1

DIVISION

+350

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-115/-105

## OUTLOOK

**Conventional wisdom has it that Golden State downgraded in the offseason, but that is not the case. Melton, Hield and Anderson give the Warriors a deep bench to rely on with plenty of offensive upside. Their schedule is also beneficial. Golden State has a +4 net rest advantage this season. They only have 14 back-to-backs on the schedule. This play is dependent on Kuminga blossoming into a legitimate wing threat and both Green and Curry staying healthy. If that happens, this team is going to be better than market expectations.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**BET OVER 43.5**



# HOUSTON ROCKETS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 41-41 SU, 46-35-1 ATS, 43-38-1 O/U

Houston was a pleasant surprise last season. It finished 41-41 SU/45-35-2 ATS and 11th in the Western Conference. The team surpassed its win total and was alive for a berth in the Western Conference Play-In Tournament up until the last days of the regular season. This season, the market expectations are much higher. The win total is 12 wins higher than where it closed, and the Rockets' power rating is higher than it was prior to last season. This season will be about whether or not this team can improve and meet the expectations bettors have thrust upon it.

Defense is going to be a strength of the Rockets' once again. They finished seventh in non-garbage time defensive efficiency last season (112.9). Where Houston was strongest was in transition. Opponents added just 0.1 points per 100 possessions through transition off live rebounds and averaged 109.3 points per 100 plays; both marks led the NBA. Overall, they were the second-best transition defense (116.9). It remains to be seen if the Rockets can lead the league in these categories once again, but it will be one of the best once more with Fred VanVleet and Dillon Brooks back in the fold.

The offense will revolve around fourth-year center Alperen Sengun. In 63 games last season, Sengun averaged 21.1 points, 9.3 rebounds and 5.0 assists on 53.7% shooting from the floor. He was second on the team in usage rate (27.1%), and after finishing third in the Most Improved Player race, he is a threat to win it this season. However, even with those eye-popping numbers Houston still finished 20th in non-garbage time offensive efficiency. If it is to improve, the young pieces will have to continue to develop.

Jabari Smith Jr. greatly improved his shooting – he went from 30.7% from deep his rookie season to 36.3% last season – but he has not had a positive impact on the court. Last season, the Rockets' net rating worsened by 9.0 points every 100 possessions with him on the floor.

Amen Thompson improved Houston's net rating by 1.5 points every 100 possessions and was a solid defender. Cam Whitmore averaged 12.1 points and 3.8 rebounds in 18.7 minutes per game. Then there is rookie guard Reed Sheppard who dominated in his short stint in the Summer League, and will almost certainly push for time at the backup point guard spot.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

150-1

CONFERENCE

65-1

DIVISION

+800

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+120/-145

## OUTLOOK

**Houston has an edict to win now from the front office and above. That is why they pushed the envelope last season with the additions of VanVleet and Brooks. The Rockets have quite a few assets to burn this season. Will they use any of them to acquire a piece at the deadline in order to get this team into the postseason? It might not be a big fish – like Kevin Durant – but it seems likely that this team will do just that. But, it will also have to maneuver through a difficult schedule. Positive Residual has Houston with the second-highest strength of schedule. It has a -2 net rest advantage for the season and 16 back-to-backs. But this is a front office dedicated to making it to the postseason, and with some young upside pieces and a desire to spend it's hard to look anywhere but Over for the Rockets this season.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN OVER 43.5**

# INDIANA

## PACERS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: CENTRAL  
2023-24 RECORD: 55-45 SU, 54-44-2 ATS, 54-44-2 O/U

The Pacers are entering the 2024-25 season with serious momentum after a run to the Eastern Conference Finals. While some may point to injury luck in their playoff success — such as Giannis Antetokounmpo getting hurt in the first round and the Knicks being depleted in the conference semifinals — Indiana wasn't at full strength either. Tyrese Haliburton, hindered by a hamstring injury, wasn't the superstar he was earlier in the season. And though he played well against New York, he missed the last two games against Boston. Additionally, the Pacers were without Bennedict Mathurin, who averaged 14.5 points per game in his second year and could have provided a spark in the playoffs.

This season, Indiana is primed to be even better. Pascal Siakam, who joined midseason last year, now has a full offseason to gel with the team. Siakam put up solid numbers after being traded from the Raptors — 21.3 points, 7.8 rebounds and 3.7 assists per game — but a full training camp could help him take things up a notch. A healthy Haliburton, one of the league's most electrifying playmakers and top pick-and-roll passers, will also be a major factor. This duo should be a nightmare for opponents.

Indiana will also benefit from Andrew Nembhard's confidence building throughout the course of the postseason. Nembhard signed a big contract extension after his playoff run, where he averaged 14.9 points and 5.5 assists per game. Nembhard is a good shooter, decision-maker and defender. He and Haliburton have the potential to become one of the best backcourts in the league.

The starting lineup is rounded out by Aaron Nesmith and Myles Turner. Nesmith is a classic 3-and-D player who doesn't need the ball to impact games offensively and takes on the toughest defensive assignments on the other end of the floor. Turner, meanwhile, is one of the NBA's top rim protectors and can stretch the floor with his shooting (35.8% from 3). Every team would love to have a center like Turner.

Mathurin's return from injury should also be a significant boost for the Pacers. He has the potential to be a Sixth Man of the Year contender and could lead what might be the best bench in the NBA. T.J. McConnell was a standout during last year's postseason, holding his own against some of the East's best guards. The Pacers rewarded him with a new deal. They also re-signed Obi Toppin, who brings elite athleticism and has developed into a reliable 3-point shooter. Ben Sheppard and Isaiah Jackson also add depth, with Sheppard bringing versatility on both ends of the floor, and Jackson providing energy and rebounding.

Another intriguing piece is Jarace Walker, the eighth pick in the 2023 NBA Draft. Although Walker didn't see much playing time as a rookie, his defensive versatility and effort to improve his offensive skills could earn him a bigger role this season. Standing at 6-foot-8, he's shown flashes of shooting promise, and his offseason focus has been on improving his ball handling and shot creation.

The sum of all of these parts is a team that was second in the NBA in adjusted offensive rating last season (120.1) and played at a blistering tempo, ranking second in pace of play. They focus on high-quality shots and have a clear sense of roles and purpose. Offensively, they're likely to be a top-five team again this year.

The big question is whether they can shore up their defense. Indiana ranked just 24th in adjusted defensive rating (117.9) last season, and with several teams in the Eastern Conference improving, breaking into the Top 15 on defense could be crucial for their success.

Overall, it's hard not to be optimistic about the Pacers, both in the short and long term. Like the Magic and Cavaliers, this Indiana team is looking to move into the top tier of the conference. With the talent they've assembled and Rick Carlisle — one of the best coaches in the league — leading the way, they have a legitimate shot at doing just that.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

60-1

CONFERENCE

25-1

DIVISION

+390

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-600/+425

## OUTLOOK

**All of the talk heading into the season is about the Celtics, Knicks, Sixers and Bucks, but it's likely that somebody will end up crashing the party. Why not the Pacers? This Indiana team plays beautiful basketball, as the offense operates with machine-like efficiency and most of the players on this team are firmly in their primes. The Pacers also have continuity, plus some young guys that could make a splash this year. I absolutely love the Over on Indiana, and this is a team I'll be looking to back throughout the course of the season. The Pacers were 54-43-3 ATS last year.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**BET OVER 46.5**



# LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: PACIFIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 53-35 SU, 40-48 ATS, 40-46-2 O/U

The Paul George era in Los Angeles is over. As is the short-lived time with Russell Westbrook. Kawhi Leonard remains with the Clippers, but his health is in question yet again after an offseason knee procedure. James Harden will have to carry Los Angeles this season as it tries to integrate new faces across the roster.

On paper, the Clippers' biggest weakness is going to be its offense. In order to replace George's production, the front office hit free agency and brought in quite a few pieces: Nic Batum, Mo Bamba, Kris Dunn, Derrick Jones Jr. and Kevin Porter Jr. Each of those players have clear strengths, but none can replicate the shot creation that George has. Where Los Angeles will go to create offense when Harden isn't on the floor – and while Leonard is sidelined – is a mystery.

Shooting also figures to be an issue for the Clippers. Jones is a career 31.6% shooter. Dunn has hit just 32.3% of his career attempts from deep. Both Dunn and Jones started Los Angeles' preseason opener and the spacing was an issue. Norman Powell, Terance Mann and Batum are off-ball shooting threats, but some of the lineups Ty Lue rolls out there could be very clunky on offense.

There is some upside with this team on offense, but it is dependent on some wild cards. Porter has some upside as a scoring threat. Porter averaged 19.2 points in the 2022-2023 season on 44.2% shooting. However, issues off the court have derailed his career. Can he stay on the court? Bones Hyland has some upside on offense as well, but his lackadaisical play on defense could keep him from getting regular minutes.

One thing to monitor with this team's offense is the pace with which it plays. This group will likely be without Leonard to start the season and George is gone. Jones is a great athlete and lob threat, and Porter is a good transition player. This team could pick up the pace in order to supplement its offense. That would be a stark contrast from a team which finished 20th in pace last season.

The positive side of this roster for Los Angeles will be its defense. Batum, Dunn and Jones are all positive defenders with the ability to switch matchups. Jones was brilliant for Dallas last season. He improved the Mavericks' defensive rating by 3.6 points every 100 possessions on the floor. When Leonard is healthy, he and Jones give the Clippers two very strong wing defenders that will be able to take on most offensive threats. It would not be shocking if Los Angeles ended up being a top-10 defense in the league.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
80-1

CONFERENCE  
35-1

DIVISION  
+850

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
+190/-240

## OUTLOOK

**What the Clippers can achieve this season all depends on what they get out of Leonard. The team is saying all of the right things – including that Leonard will be available to start the season – but the team has lied about these things in the past. The schedule has some incredible challenges as well. The Clippers have 16 back-to-backs – a league-high – and do not have an edge when it comes to rest advantages. If Leonard surprises most and is available for a majority of games, this team could surpass its win total, but it would be a fool's errand to expect that.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 39.5**



STEVE MAKINEN'S  
POWER RATING

98.0  
(#18 QF-30)

# LOS ANGELES LAKERS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: PACIFIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 50-39 SU, 43-46 ATS, 49-38-2 O/U

Los Angeles is running it back. Only one player – Taurean Prince – who averaged more than 25 minutes and appeared in a majority of contests is gone. Jordan Goodwin and Christian Koloko were the lone free agent additions to this team. Despite barely making it into the postseason last year, Los Angeles is going to war with the core that won the seventh seed in the Western Conference. That could be a mistake in what looks like a loaded West on paper this season.

There is one big change to note for the Lakers: head coach JJ Redick. The former ESPN pundit parlayed his success in media into a NBA head coaching gig. Redick has not coached before, but he has promised an analytical approach to the game, and he believes a change in scheme can get Los Angeles to the promised land.

Redick has already told the media what he plans to do with his starting lineup. D'Angelo Russell, Austin Reaves, Rui Hachimura, LeBron James and Anthony Davis have already been named as the primary starters. Those five were very effective last season. The Lakers outscored opponents by 6.6 points every 100 possessions with that lineup on the floor. They posted a 117.7 offensive rating and were in the 87th percentile in defensive rating (111.1). Los Angeles went 23-10 SU when that group started, and the hope is that they can recapture some of that success.

The new regime has also promised more 3-point shooting. The Lakers were a very accurate shooting team last season. They finished seventh in overall shooting (38.7%) and third in non-corner shooting (38.6%). However, Los Angeles finished 28th in frequency of 3-point attempts (32.9%). A higher frequency of attempts will likely cause a dip in overall accuracy, but a higher volume of 3-point attempts will be great for a team that pressures the rim as often as this one.

This team's biggest question is its depth. Gabe Vincent projects to be their primary backup point guard. Jarred Vanderbilt and Cam Reddish give the Lakers solid wing depth, but the minutes behind Davis are going to be an adventure. The Lakers are also hoping Max Christie is going to take a solid step forward in his development. Christie averaged 4.2 points and 2.1 rebounds in 14.1 minutes per game last season. He shot 35.6% from deep. If he can turn into a legitimate scoring threat this bench unit will be in much better shape.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
**30-1**

CONFERENCE  
**14-1**

DIVISION  
**+425**

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
**-105/-115**

## OUTLOOK

**It is hard to imagine anything other than what we saw from Los Angeles last season. In fact, it seems more plausible this team takes a step back. James played in 71 games last season, the most in a season since 2018. Davis played in 76 contests, the most in his career. Yet, the Lakers finished with the 10th seed. Can they get that same health luck with the two best players? Los Angeles does not have a particularly daunting schedule. It has a net +1 rest advantage for the season and only 13 back-to-backs. But, if they get worse injury luck with their two stars this team could be in for a worse season than a year ago.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 43.5**

# MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 27-55 SU, 40-42 ATS, 37-44-1 O/U

The 2023-2024 season was an absolute nightmare for the Grizzlies. The team lost the most games due to injury, suspension and personal reasons. One would expect some positive regression when it comes to health, but that is not the case, as Jaren Jackson Jr. has already suffered a hamstring strain and is expected to miss a good chunk of time. Still, Ja Morant is back and the team has revamped its coaching staff in hopes of reaching the postseason for the fourth time in five seasons.

Memphis will be implementing a new offense this season. One that prioritizes ball movement and cuts to the basket. The thought is that less will be on the shoulders of Morant. The Grizzlies' point guard has ranked in the 80th percentile or higher in assist rate in three of his four full seasons, so the role of facilitator will be one he can fit in. The new system also preaches pace in halfcourt settings. With increased ball movement, players like Marcus Smart and Desmond Bane will have opportunities to assist frequently throughout games.

Regardless of the new system, if the Grizzlies are to be successful Morant has to be available. He has not played in more than 67 games in a season, and his career-high came in his rookie year. Whether it be injury or suspension, Morant needs to avoid it so he can give Memphis the best chance at winning.

Backcourt play for the Grizzlies figures to be a strength if Morant, Smart and Bane are all healthy this season. The frontcourt is not on solid ground though. Steven Adams is gone, and Jackson is in danger of missing time. Rookie Zach Edey figures to have a massive role for Memphis this season. Brandon Clarke remains on the team, but he played in just six games last season due to his recovery from a ruptured Achilles.

Shooting could be a concern for the Grizzlies' offense. Smart and Morant have shot under 33% percent from deep for their careers. Jackson shot 39.4% his second season, but has hit just 32.6% of 3-point attempts since then. Luke Kennard is the team's best shooter coming off the bench, but other than him and Bane there is not much knockdown shooting on this roster.

Defense has been a staple under Taylor Jenkins, and when fully healthy this team can be great on that end of the floor. Jackson is a former Defensive Player of the Year, as is Smart. But, Morant has been known to be targeted by opposing offenses, and Edey will be picked on by opponents as well. How much will this defense – which finished 13th in non-garbage time defensive efficiency – suffer with Morant and Edey being put in so many actions?

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

40-1

CONFERENCE

15-1

DIVISION

+260

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-225/+180

## OUTLOOK

**Health is a concern with Memphis before the season begins, but if Jackson can come back early into the season this team has a very high ceiling. Morant is an excellent offensive piece who has averaged 26.8 points per game in his last two full seasons. Jenkins also showed he can coach, and he will raise the floor of this team with his scheme on both ends. The defense will carry this team on most nights, but spacing and shooting concerns could loom large.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 47.5**



# MIAMI

## HEAT

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHEAST  
2023-24 RECORD: 48-41 SU, 43-43-3 ATS, 38-51 O/U

The Heat have ranked in the Top 10 in adjusted defensive rating in each of the last four seasons, a testament to Erik Spoelstra's ability to motivate his players. Despite having guys in and out of the lineup, Spoelstra's teams remain strong defensively, especially on the perimeter, where they held opponents to 35.7% shooting from beyond the arc on non-heaves last season, the third-best mark in the NBA. That ability to defend gives Miami a high floor, reflected in their -500 odds to make the playoffs. However, surpassing their season win total of 44.5 and making a deep playoff run is more of a question mark.

Last season, the Heat won 46 games despite Jimmy Butler missing 22 games, Bam Adebayo missing 11 and Tyler Herro sitting out 40. For the Heat to thrive in an increasingly competitive Eastern Conference, these key players, along with role players, need to be healthier. Simply limping into the playoffs and hoping for the right matchup may no longer be sufficient for Miami.

Butler and Adebayo are crucial to the Heat's identity. With both on the court, Miami allowed just 110.8 points per 100 possessions and had a net rating of +4.8. However, the team's overall net rating was only +1.7, with 112.7 points allowed per 100 possessions. Butler and Adebayo embody "Heat Culture," driving Miami's intensity. Butler guards top opposing wings, while Adebayo disrupts pick-and-rolls as one of the most switchable centers in the league. Offensively, both players wear many hats. Butler can score 30 points on any given night or act as a facilitator, while Adebayo has developed into a reliable 20-point scorer and remains an elite passer for a big man.

The main concern for Miami is whether there's enough firepower outside of Butler and Adebayo to compete in the Eastern Conference. Herro, despite his flaws, is crucial for the Heat's success. While Miami made a Finals run without him two years ago, the team isn't good enough offensively to survive without someone who averaged 20.8 points and 4.5 assists per game on strong shooting splits last season. Miami's offense struggled last year, ranking just 21st in adjusted offensive rating, partly due to Herro's prolonged absence.

Another key piece is Terry Rozier, acquired from the Hornets last season. Rozier averaged 16.4 points and 4.6 assists per game after joining Miami. Though criticized as a "chucker" for his shot-heavy tendencies — especially when it comes to pull-up jumpers — Rozier's scoring ability fills a void on a team that has struggled to generate offense in recent years.

The development of young players like Jaime Jaquez Jr., Nikola Jovic and rookie Kel'e Ware could also be critical to Miami's success this season. Jaquez, who made the All-Rookie First Team last year, averaged 11.9 points, 3.8 rebounds, and 2.6 assists in his first season. The Heat will rely heavily on him, though his shooting — 32.2% from 3 during the regular season, dipping to 23.1% in the playoffs — needs improvement. Jovic, while not a regular contributor yet, shows promise as a 6-foot-10 forward with shooting and ball-handling ability. Ware, a 7-foot center with both rim-running skills and 3-point shooting range, is seen as a potential long-term fit next to Adebayo.

If Jaquez and Jovic show significant improvement, Miami's championship window might reopen. However, there is concern that the team may be heading in the wrong direction, especially as the rest of the Eastern Conference strengthens. Much of Miami's fate depends on Butler, who turned 35 before the season. His numbers last year showed a decline, with his Offensive EPM being well below his OEPM in 2023 and his Defensive EPM being the lowest since 2015. If Butler can't return to peak form, Miami might not even make the playoffs.

Perhaps a shift in offensive philosophy can help this team out. Spoelstra has been emphasizing 3s — even allowing Adebayo to launch some — and devaluing the mid-range shot in training camp. Miami was first in the NBA in mid-range frequency (35.6%) last year, and Spoelstra wants a more modern offense.

While Miami's defense provides a solid foundation, their playoff hopes are reliant on health, offensive development and whether their veteran stars can continue to perform at a high level. The Heat have the potential to win any single playoff series, but winning multiple with this current roster might not be in the cards anymore. Perhaps Miami will change that with a move or two at the deadline.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

45-1

CONFERENCE

20-1

DIVISION

+180

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-500/+360

## OUTLOOK

**A lot of teams are getting better in the Eastern Conference, and that means that others are due for some regression. The Heat are as good a pick as any to slide down the pecking order a bit. The wheels probably won't fall off in Miami as long as Spoelstra is around, but the talent just isn't there when looking at this team. When you add in the high probability of injuries, this looks like a team that will win 44 or fewer games. Maybe Miami sneaks into the playoffs through the Play-In Tournament again, and that would then put a higher seed on upset watch. But that feels like the ceiling for this group.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 44.5**

# MILWAUKEE

## BUCKS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: CENTRAL  
2023-24 RECORD: 51-37 SU, 38-50 ATS, 44-43-1 O/U

The Bucks were expected to compete for a championship last year after acquiring Damian Lillard from the Blazers, but things didn't go as planned. Although Lillard averaged 24.3 points and 7.0 assists per game, his efficiency dropped, and his defense was an issue. Losing Giannis Antetokounmpo in the playoffs also proved costly, as the team was eliminated by Indiana in the first round. Now, many rank the Bucks behind teams like Boston, New York and Philadelphia in the Eastern Conference. However, there are reasons to be optimistic about Milwaukee's potential this season.

One major factor is head coach Doc Rivers, who took over for Adrian Griffin mid-season. While Rivers is often criticized, he is a proven winner, having led a team to an NBA title. After he took charge on January 29th, the Bucks' defense improved, going from allowing 117.4 points per 100 possessions to 114.5 points per 100 possessions. Rivers helped stabilize the defense, which is crucial because with Lillard, Antetokounmpo and Khris Middleton, an average defense should be enough.

Lillard remains one of the best shooters in the game and can still get to the rim with ease. Paired with Antetokounmpo, who averaged 30.4 points, 11.5 rebounds, and 6.5 assists per game last year, the two should form an unstoppable duo. While they didn't quite gel as expected last season, there's optimism that more time together will improve their chemistry. The two stars have discussed how their relationship has grown off the court, which could translate into better on-court success. Lillard's shooting should create more space for Antetokounmpo to dominate in the paint, and Rivers could look to run more plays that involve both players as screeners to maximize the potential of this twosome.

If Lillard and Antetokounmpo can develop a strong two-man game, the Bucks will be hard to stop. Last season, Milwaukee ranked sixth in the NBA in adjusted offensive rating (117.6), but they have the potential to be the league's best offensive team. Middleton remains a talented scorer, as he showed by averaging 24.7 points per game in the playoffs. Brook Lopez, one of the best shooting centers in the league, adds another dimension with his 36.6% shooting on 5.1 3-point attempts per game. Additionally, Milwaukee made a key offseason move by signing Gary Trent Jr. on a veteran's minimum contract. Trent shot 39.3% from deep on 6.4 attempts per game last year and should thrive with better looks. He'll be an afterthought for opposing teams, which should lead to some wide open shots.

The main concern entering this season is Middleton's health, particularly after he underwent procedures on both ankles during the offseason. It might take him some time to get back to full speed, but he's been through similar situations before and should be back in form by the time the playoffs arrive. Fortunately, the Bucks now have the depth to manage short-term absences from any of their star players — at least in the regular season.

In addition to Trent, the Bucks added Delon Wright and Taurean Prince on veteran minimum deals. Wright is a solid defender who brings toughness on the perimeter, while Prince is a capable shooter who can guard multiple positions. These additions, along with bench players Bobby Portis and Pat Connaughton, give Milwaukee one of the best second units in the league. Portis is a potent scorer off the bench, and Connaughton is a reliable shooter who can also facilitate offense and bring energy on both ends.

Ultimately, the gap between the Bucks and other top Eastern Conference contenders isn't as wide as people think. Milwaukee's depth concerns have been addressed, and the team's success will depend largely on how their stars perform and whether they can stay healthy. With Lillard and Trent providing perimeter shooting, Antetokounmpo attacking the rim, Middleton scoring smoothly and Lopez spacing the floor, the Bucks have all the tools to be an offensive force. Defensively, Lopez remains an elite rim protector, and Antetokounmpo continues to be a game-changer on that end. Rivers just needs to bring all these pieces together for Milwaukee to return to title contention.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

14-1

CONFERENCE

+600

DIVISION

-145

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-3000/+1300

## OUTLOOK

**While this team has championship upside, the core players are old and injury prone. So, even with the Bucks having added valuable depth, the Under on the regular season win total looks like the right play. Milwaukee will also spend some of the season toying with ideas and lineups, as the main goal will be maximizing the talent in order to make a run in the postseason. That will come at the expense of winning some games. With that in mind, Milwaukee might not look like an elite team in the regular season. But I wouldn't hate any futures on the Bucks to win the East or the NBA title. Both are realistic goals.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 50.5**



# MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: NORTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 65-33 SU, 49-47-2 ATS, 51-46-1 O/U

Minnesota shocked the basketball world when it traded Karl-Anthony Towns to New York prior to the start of training camp. Towns was a massive piece of a team that made it to the Western Conference Finals last season, but this team is different – not worse – than it was last season. There is still plenty to like about the Timberwolves.

The Towns trade is made possible by the presence of Naz Reid. The reigning Sixth Man of the Year was brilliant off the bench last season. He averaged 13.5 points and 5.2 rebounds on 47.7% shooting from the floor. When Reid was at power forward, Minnesota outscored opponents by 7.7 points every 100 possessions. With Rudy Gobert next to him at center, their net rating was +8.4 per 100 possessions. That is on par with the pairing of Towns and Gobert (+9.2). Reid can stretch the floor from the four as effectively as Towns – he shot 41.4% from deep last season – while also providing help defense at the rim. The Timberwolves should not miss a beat with Reid as their starting power forward.

This deal also gives Minnesota some much-needed depth. Prior to the trade, much was going to be asked of rookies Rob Dillingham and Terrence Shannon Jr. Now, everyone gets pushed down the depth chart with the additions of Julius Randle and Donte DiVincenzo.

The former Villanova Knick is a career 37.6% shooter from deep. He hit 40.1% of his attempts last season. He obviously provides some shooting off the bench, and he can spell Mike Conley at the point. That might not be perfect, so Dillingham will still need to develop. But it will not have to happen as quickly.

Randle is a great rebounder and scorer who gives Minnesota a physical presence up front they did not have last season. Randle is a career 33.3% shooter who has shot just 32.9% the last three seasons. His fit next to Gobert is not great, but Reid can slide to center and play very well next to him.

The Timberwolves will also still be just as good defensively as they were last season. Anthony Edwards is the best two-way player in the league, and Jaden McDaniels is one of the best wing defenders in the NBA. Those two with Gobert form one of the best defensive trios on any team. Nothing but injuries should keep this team from being a top-five defense once again.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

10-1

CONFERENCE

+500

DIVISION

+230

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-1200/+700

## OUTLOOK

**Minnesota still sports the second-highest win total in the Western Conference at DraftKings (52.5) and for good reason. This team's depth is stronger after the trade of Towns, and they have a replacement for him. Its schedule is very manageable as well. The Timberwolves have a +2 net rest advantage on the season and only play in 14 back-to-backs. It also helps playing in the Northwest division. Oklahoma City will be very good, but Denver figures to take a step back and both Utah and Portland are lottery teams. Minnesota should be in the mix for a top-three seed in the Western Conference once again this season.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

BET OVER 52.5





STEVE MAKINEN'S  
POWER RATING

99.0  
(#14 OF 30)

# NEW ORLEANS PELICANS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 50-38 SU, 45-42-1 ATS, 37-49-2 O/U

New Orleans made one of the biggest offseason splashes this summer when it acquired Dejounte Murray from Atlanta. The price was not exorbitant. The Pelicans retained most of its depth, and they now have a roster that has the potential to go toe-to-toe with some of the best in their conference.

One could actually argue the trade for Murray caused more problems than it fixed, only because Willie Green now has a monster decision when it comes to his starting lineup. Murray, Zion Williamson and Brandon Ingram are mortal locks to start, but the rest of the positions are up for grabs. Trey Murphy – a sharp-shooting wing who has hit 39.2% of his 3-point attempts – would be vital for a starting lineup that does not have much shooting. But, does that mean CJ McCollum would come off the bench? New Orleans also has a massive hole in its roster at center which will cause some problems.

Yves Missi, Daniel Theis and Trey Jemison are the only centers on this roster. Jemison is a second-year player on a two-way deal. The Pelicans could certainly reach out to a team like Portland which has a glut of big men, but for now there seems to be no movement on that front. Making it even more perplexing was Green's resistance to Williamson as a small-ball center when New Orleans had its media days at the beginning of October.

Regardless, Murray unlocks an interesting aspect of the Pelicans' offense now that he is here. When he was on the floor without Trae Young last season, Atlanta had a positive net rating. Its most used lineup with just Murray was +12.5 per 100 possessions. He averaged 25.1 points and 9.1 assists in those games. New Orleans desperately needed a true lead guard and Murray fills that role.

The Pelicans should be an above average defense once again this season. Murray is overrated as a defender, but is still competent on that end. Murphy is also a solid wing defender in his own right. Then there is Herb Jones. The fourth-year wing is one of the best defenders in the league, and he has added to his value by becoming consistent from beyond the arc. Lineups with him, Murphy and Murray should be very strong on defense. New Orleans finished eighth in non-garbage time defensive efficiency last season (113.0). That seems high for this group, but around 10th is a realistic goal.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

55-1

CONFERENCE

22-1

DIVISION

+380

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-170/+140

## OUTLOOK

Looming over this season for New Orleans is not only its lack of center depth, but it is also the status of Brandon Ingram. Ingram is in the final year of his current deal, and he has yet to reach an agreement with the Pelicans. The team explored trades for him in the offseason, but nothing came to fruition. Will he be on the team after the trade deadline? If he isn't, then what does New Orleans get for him in return? Ingram has shown no intention of sitting out or missing time, so we must evaluate this team as it is constructed. I believe this team is better than it was last season. This group won 49 games last season and added a talent like Murray. That is worth looking over a lower win total.

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

LEAN OVER 45.5



# NEW YORK KNICKS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: ATLANTIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 57-38 SU, 50-43-2 ATS, 46-49 O/U

The Knicks were one of the best teams in the Eastern Conference last season, finishing 50-32 and ranking fifth in the league in net rating (+4.6). They boasted top-10 adjusted offensive and defensive ratings and might have reached the Eastern Conference Finals if not for injuries. However, instead of resting on his team's success, team president Leon Rose made two major offseason trades.

First, the Knicks traded Bojan Bogdanovic and five first-round picks to the Nets for Mikal Bridges. Then, when it became clear that New York needed another center with health concerns for Mitchell Robinson, they sent three-time All-Star Julius Randle, along with Donte DiVincenzo and a first-round pick, to the Timberwolves for four-time All-Star Karl-Anthony Towns.

With Bridges, New York's vision is pretty clear. The team sees him and OG Anunoby forming an elite defensive wing duo. Bridges also has chemistry with Jalen Brunson and Josh Hart, his former Villanova teammates. Bridges, who averaged 19.6 points per game last season, will likely serve as New York's secondary creator. In his time in Brooklyn, Bridges proved that he had more off-the-dribble game than he showed in Phoenix. He also shot 37.2% from 3 and that number could go up with the quality of looks he'll get with the Knicks.

As for Towns, the fit is going to be interesting. Towns is one of the best shooters in the league. He has shot at least 40.0% from 3 in five of his nine seasons. Towns should be an awesome pick-and-pop partner for Brunson. He's also capable of creating offense for himself. And while Towns isn't quite as good of a playmaker as Randle, or last year's starter Isaiah Hartenstein, he is a decent passer and New York can run some offense through him.

The problem with Towns is that he has been a minus on the defensive end for most of his career. The good news is that he's a little better as a center than a power forward, and he's primarily going to be the five for the Knicks. But losing Hartenstein, one of the best interior defenders in basketball, and replacing him with Towns will put the Knicks at risk of falling out of the Top 10 in defensive efficiency.

However, what the Knicks will lose on defense will be made up for on offense. New York scored 118.8 points per 100 possessions last year, but the team was pretty reliant on its 25.4% offensive rebound rate. This year's team will be less gritty and more pretty. The Knicks are still going to lean into Brunson iso-ball, as he averaged 28.7 points and 6.7 assists per game last season. He emerged as one of the best offensive players in basketball, and he shouldn't see much of a decline in his 31.1% usage rate. But the difference with this year's team is that there's now elite shooting pretty much everywhere. That gives Brunson more space to work with, which will allow him to get to his spots whenever he wants.

Anunoby, Bridges and Towns all excel as catch-and-shoot players, and even Hart, though not a sharpshooter, hit 37.3% from deep in the playoffs and can't be left unguarded. If defenses ignore him, Hart will dominate the offensive glass.

The Knicks' team-building strategy clearly takes aim at the Celtics, as they want to play five-out lineups and have Anunoby and Bridges to throw on Boston's stars Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown. The Knicks believe they are the second-best team in the conference and prepared for a potential seven-game shootout with the Celtics, where 3-point shooting could decide the series. "It's a make or miss league" would be put to the ultimate test in that matchup.

While New York arguably has the best starting five in basketball, depth is a concern. Proven bench players are limited to Deuce McBride, a small 3-and-D guard, and Robinson, who will miss the early part of the season. Beyond that, the Knicks will rely on players like Precious Achiuwa and whichever rotation candidates — Cameron Payne, Landry Shamet or Tyler Kolek — step up. This lack of depth could "force" head coach Tom Thibodeau to heavily rely on his starters, but that wouldn't be anything new. Thibs wants his favorites to play until they're ready to puke.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
**+800**

CONFERENCE  
**+400**

DIVISION  
**+290**

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
**-5000/+1800**

## OUTLOOK

**The Knicks have more upside because of the moves they made. However, it is hard to go Over on a team like this. You generally have to pay a tax to go Over on a team this popular. Also, the team did lose some of its edge, so there might not be the same nightly desire to win. On top of that, New York has some key players that will surely miss games — Anunoby and Towns are very injury prone — and the team doesn't have the depth to overcome that. So, the Knicks should be a little worse than expected in the regular season, but they're better equipped for the postseason — and can possibly compete for a championship.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 54.5**





# OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: NORTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 63-29 SU, 52-39-1 ATS, 48-43-1 O/U

Fresh off of a 57-25 season the Oklahoma City Thunder were not happy with being eliminated in the conference semifinals. The Thunder front office responded by dominating the offseason with two massive acquisitions: Alex Caruso and Isaiah Hartenstein.

Oklahoma City was one of the worst rebounding teams in the NBA last season. It finished 28th in rebounding rate (48.4%) and 27th in offensive rebounding (23.7%). Hartenstein will alleviate those issues. In his two seasons as a Knick, Hartenstein finished in the 89th percentile or higher in offensive rebounding rate. He was in the 61st percentile in defensive rebounding.

Hartenstein also fits on the floor with Chet Holmgren, whose shooting – he shot 37.9% last season – will allow the Thunder’s spacing to remain intact. That also means Oklahoma City will have two 7-footers on the floor at once, which should also greatly improve their rebounding.

Caruso is an excellent defender that fits perfectly with a team that finished fourth in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (112.0) last season. Luguentz Dort and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander are elite defenders in their own right. Now, Mark Daigneault can employ lineups with all three on the floor at once, giving the Thunder one of the best perimeter defenses in the NBA.

The addition of Caruso works so well because of his shooting, as well as his defense. The former Bulls guard shot 40.6% on 3.9 catch-and-shoot 3-point attempts last season. Dort shot 39.9% on such attempts. Jalen Williams hit 43.4% of his catch-and-shoot shots from deep. Any combination of the three still work very well on offense around Gilgeous-Alexander.

Speaking of, that offense should be very good once again.

Oklahoma City was third in non-garbage time offensive rating last season (120.0). The team is balanced, but that offensive production begins with its young star.

Gilgeous-Alexander finished second in MVP voting last season. He was third in scoring (30.1) and finished in the 100th percentile at his position in points per 100 shot attempts (128.0). When he was on the floor for the Thunder, they outscored opponents by 11.3 points every 100 possessions. Oklahoma City should be near that mark in those minutes once again this season.

Over the last three seasons, the Thunder are 146-104-8 ATS (56.6%). They were the fourth-best cover team in the league last season at 52-39-1 ATS (57.1%) over both the regular season and postseason. This year, it might be hard for this team to cover at such a high rate with massive market expectations.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS  
**+700**

CONFERENCE  
**+340**

DIVISION  
**-110**

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)  
**-2500/+1100**

## OUTLOOK

**Oklahoma City has the second-highest win total on the board at DraftKings (56.5), behind only the Boston Celtics. It has a -1 net rest advantage for the season, and the team is among 11 others with a league-high 16 back-to-backs. One also has to wonder if the same injury luck will carry over for a team which lost the second-fewest games to injury last season. Still, this is the best team in the Western Conference with a young core. Even with such a high win total and negative schedule factors, the expectation should be for this team to surpass its win total this season.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**BET OVER 56.5**



# ORLANDO MAGIC

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHEAST  
2023-24 RECORD: 50-39 SU, 55-34 ATS, 38-48-3 O/U

Last season, the Magic finished 47-35, securing the fifth seed in the Eastern Conference, a significant leap from their 34-48 record in 2022-23. The improvement was driven by a strong defense and the continued development of their young core. Orlando went from 16th in the NBA in adjusted defensive rating two seasons ago to third last year.

Jalen Suggs and Franz Wagner were instrumental in this defensive transformation. Suggs is one of the league's best point-of-attack defenders, while Wagner excels as a wing defender. Adding to this, Wendell Carter Jr. is a solid defender at center, and Jonathan Isaac, despite limited minutes last season (15.8 per game), made a huge defensive impact off the bench. In the playoffs, Isaac's minutes increased to 21.0 per game, and with him further removed from the ACL injury he suffered in 2019-20, he could see more consistent playing time this year.

Head coach Jamahl Mosley's system has maximized the team's defensive potential, and their offseason moves promise even more improvement. The signing of Kentavious Caldwell-Pope to a three-year, \$66 million deal was one of the highlights of NBA free agency. Known as one of the best 3-and-D shooting guards in the league, Caldwell-Pope will form a tough backcourt pairing with Suggs. This duo should keep opposing teams on edge, and it's likely the Magic will maintain their top-five defensive standing.

Caldwell-Pope's shooting is also a critical addition to Orlando's offense, which ranked just 22nd in adjusted offensive rating last season. The Magic struggled from deep, ranking 27th in 3-point frequency and 25th in accuracy. Caldwell-Pope, a career 36.9% 3-point shooter, has shot over 40.0% from beyond the arc in three of the last four seasons. His floor-spacing ability will open up the offense without sacrificing any defense.

The improved shooting around Paolo Banchero will be key for Orlando's offensive success. Banchero isn't as prominent defensively but stands out as one of the best young offensive players in the league. Last season, he averaged 22.6 points, 6.9 rebounds and 5.4 assists, despite being the focal point of the opposing team's scouting report. Banchero's unique blend of size (6-foot-10, 250 pounds), ball-handling and driving ability makes him a difficult matchup. His pull-up shooting is also improving, and his performance in last year's playoffs was particularly impressive. Against the Cavaliers, Banchero averaged 27.0 points per game and was a major reason the Magic forced a seven-game series despite the struggles of his teammates.

With more floor spacing this season, Banchero's offensive efficiency should improve, as teams will find it harder to overload defenders on him.

While making another substantial jump in the win column may be tough, the Magic winning 50 games is within reach. More importantly, they have the potential to make a deep run in the Eastern Conference Playoffs.

Wagner's 3-point shooting will be a critical factor in determining the Magic's ceiling. Wagner shot 35.4% from deep in his rookie season and improved to 36.1% in 2022-23. However, last season saw a sharp decline as he shot only 28.1% from beyond the arc, a surprising drop given his free throw percentage was up at 85.0%. Wagner is still an excellent all-around player, but with the Eastern Conference loaded with talent, the Magic need him firing on all cylinders.

If Wagner can regain some semblance of an outside shot, Orlando will have the firepower to compete with the elite teams in the conference, such as Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Milwaukee, in any playoff series.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

65-1

CONFERENCE

25-1

DIVISION

-155

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-750/+500

## OUTLOOK

**With the Magic coming off a 47-win season and having added one of the best free agents on the market, I can see why it makes sense to back Orlando to go Over 47.5 — especially with this roster being loaded with absolute dogs. Having said that, I just wouldn't be surprised if the Magic settle on 45-47 wins. However, I do expect Orlando to be a much better basketball team this season. Getting out of the first round should be the goal, and expectations could be a little higher if Wagner's jumper comes around.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 47.5**

# PHILADELPHIA

## 76ERS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: ATLANTIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 50-39 SU, 51-37-1 ATS, 48-41 O/U

The Sixers made a splash this offseason by signing nine-time All-Star Paul George to a four-year, \$212 million deal. Despite efforts by the Clippers to keep George, their offers didn't meet his expectations. Los Angeles never got there in length, and some of the rumored salary numbers were straight up disrespectful. Once it became clear Los Angeles wouldn't offer him a four-year max deal, George began exploring other options and found a contender in the Sixers, who had cap space and a need for another star alongside Joel Embiid and Tyrese Maxey.

George, who turns 35 during this year's playoffs, remains an elite player, averaging 22.6 points, 5.2 rebounds, 3.5 assists and 1.5 steals per game last season while shooting 41.3% from 3. His ability as a three-level scorer, coupled with his proficiency in catch-and-shoot situations, makes him an ideal fit alongside Embiid and Maxey. George also brings playmaking skills, meaning he'll handle the ball often and get his chances to run the team's offense.

Defensively, George was in the 91st percentile in Defensive EPM last season. While age might gradually impact his athleticism, George remains a plus-level wing defender. His presence on the perimeter, with Embiid's rim protection, strengthens the Sixers' defense.

In addition to bringing George in, Sixers president of basketball operations Daryl Morey made some other great moves. Philadelphia re-signed Kelly Oubre Jr., brought back veteran point guard Kyle Lowry and added Caleb Martin, Andre Drummond, Eric Gordon and Guerschon Yabusele, who balled out for France in the 2024 Paris Olympics. The team also selected Duke sharpshooter Jared McCain with the 16th pick in the 2024 NBA Draft.

Martin, who averaged 10 points, 4.4 rebounds, and 2.2 assists per game last year, will start alongside George at forward, making the Sixers somewhat undersized outside of Embiid. This could result in a different playing style compared to last season. Head coach Nick Nurse will still allow Embiid to play his game, so there will be post-ups, mid-range jumpers and everything that comes with having an elite inside presence. But this will also be a more 3-happy offense. Last season, the Sixers ranked 25th in 3-point frequency (33.9%) and 19th in 3-point accuracy (36.7% on non-heaves), but this season's starting lineup features four capable shooters alongside Embiid. That should mean a significant increase in attempts, and the players will likely knock them down at a higher clip.

A more perimeter-oriented offense could benefit Embiid and Maxey. Embiid will have more room to operate inside, and Maxey, one of the league's most explosive drivers, will find clearer lanes to the basket. This setup also helps George, who will be lower on the opposing team's scouting report than he has been since his days in Indiana, leading to better looks and more favorable isolation opportunities.

With Nurse at the helm and a retooled roster, the Sixers have the potential to rank in the top 10 in both offensive and defensive rating. This is a team with legitimate title aspirations, but the main concern is health. Embiid played only 39 games last season due to knee issues and has never played 70 games in a season. However, he lost significant weight in the offseason and has expressed a desire to prioritize his postseason health over regular-season accolades. Expect the Sixers to manage Embiid's minutes carefully, especially with Drummond as a reliable backup. Drummond, a double-double machine, could be a starter elsewhere and will allow the team to rest Embiid when necessary.

George's health is also a concern, though he played 74 games last season and was available in the playoffs. Philadelphia may take a cautious approach with him too.

In the end, this Sixers team might not be as dominant in the regular season but will be a force to reckon with when the playoffs begin. Opponents will have to deal with the league's most dominant big man in Embiid, flanked by an explosive scoring guard, an All-Star wing and one of the better supporting casts in basketball. This is arguably the best team Embiid has ever played with, positioning the Sixers as strong contenders for a championship.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

+900

CONFERENCE

+450

DIVISION

+380

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-3000/+1300

## OUTLOOK

**The Sixers are going to be very careful with Embiid and George, so they likely won't be at the top of the Eastern Conference standings. However, the Sixers aren't going to punt on the regular season. Philadelphia likely wants to at least earn home-court advantage in the opening round of the playoffs. Winning 53 or more games is probably required there. That said, I lean towards the Over on the win total. It helps that Philadelphia has Maxey to carry the squad when the other stars sit. The Sixers are also deep with reliable bench players. As far as the bigger picture goes, Philadelphia can beat anyone. As long as Maxey, Embiid and George are out there, the Sixers can win a championship.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

LEAN OVER 52.5

# PHOENIX SUNS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: PACIFIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 49-37 SU, 35-49-2 ATS, 40-45-1 O/U

The first season with the trio of Bradley Beal, Kevin Durant and Devin Booker was a failure. As a result, Frank Vogel paid the price and was fired after just one season at the helm. In his place is Mike Budenholzer, and in a league where player movement can shake up an entire league, his hiring might be the most impactful move of the offseason.

Budenholzer has promised to get Phoenix behind the 3-point line. The Suns are loaded with mid-range specialists, but all three are capable shooters. Last season, Phoenix ranked second in mid-range frequency (34.9%) and it led the league in long mid-range frequency (12.5%). Yes, they finished second in shooting percentage in both categories, but this is about the math game for the Suns. This is a team that shot 38.8% from 3-point range, 38.1% on non-corner attempts and 40.9% from the corners. If this team becomes a high-volume shooting team, then the ninth-best offense last season – 118.3 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time – can be even better.

In order to reach those heights, the team will need better availability from Beal. He played in just 53 games last season. But, when he was on the floor with Durant and Booker, the team was one of the best in the league. With that trio on the floor, the Suns averaged 123.3 points per 100 possessions and had a +7.5 net rating. Its defense was average – 115.8 defensive rating with those lineups ranked in the 49th percentile – but not abhorrent. Having said that, Beal has not played in more than 60 games since the 2018-2019 season. It seems like a longshot that he surpasses that 60-game mark at this point of his career.

The biggest personnel move came in the form of the team acquiring point guard Tyus Jones. Phoenix lacked a true point guard last season, and instead tried to make it work with either Booker or Beal at the top of the offense. Jones is an extremely strong facilitator that has ranked in the 93rd percentile or higher in assist-to-usage rate ratio in five of the last six seasons. Not only does he fit on the floor with Phoenix's star trio, but he gives them a guard to lean on if Beal misses time.

Defensively, the Suns surprised by finishing 12th in non-garbage time defensive efficiency (114.3) last season. It might not finish that high this season. Budenholzer will utilize the drop defense he played so frequently in Milwaukee at times, but it is unknown whether Nurkic will be able to handle the role Brook Lopez played so well under him.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

30-1

CONFERENCE

15-1

DIVISION

+215

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-210/+170

## OUTLOOK

**Phoenix has an extremely high ceiling once again this season. The floor of this offense with players like Beal, Durant and Booker is higher than almost every team in the league. Under Budenholzer, they should take a more sound approach to their offense, with a stronger emphasis on 3-point shooting. The schedule does provide some challenges. The Suns have a -4 net rest advantage, they play 16 back-to-backs and they travel the ninth-most miles this season. But, that is not enough to keep me off this team. Phoenix won 49 games last season, and they are arguably better this season.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

BET OVER 46.5



# PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: NORTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 21-61 SU, 39-41-2 ATS, 40-42 O/U

Portland was 21-61 SU/39-41-2 ATS last season. It finished 29th in non-garbage time net rating (-10.3). Its offense averaged 108.2 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time; the second-lowest mark in the league. The Trail Blazers' defense was slightly better, but they still finished 23rd in the league in defensive efficiency (118.5).

The betting market has Portland rated as the second-worst team in the NBA. However, this roster is not devoid of talent. It all just depends on how Chauncey Billups decides to employ that talent this season.

The Trail Blazers had the seventh-highest frequency of mid-range attempts (32.4%) and the fifth-highest rate of long mid-range shots (10.5%). But, the team finished last in mid-range shooting (39.2%). In fact, Portland finished 30th in four of the seven shooting categories Cleaning The Glass tracks. That needs to improve.

Defensively, the rim protection needs to take a step forward this season. The Trail Blazers allowed opponents to take 35.2% of their attempts at the rim. They ranked 29th in opponent shooting at the rim (70.8%) and 27th in blocks per game (4.3). Portland has no shortage of centers on this roster, so one would think this aspect of its defense is destined to improve this season.

What the Trail Blazers get from their young core must also improve this season.

Shaedon Sharpe was limited to just 32 games last season due to an abdominal injury. He averaged 11.6 points and 3.5 rebounds. There was a severe decline in his efficiency as well. Sharpe ranked in the 26th percentile at his position in points per 100 shot attempts (106.5) and shot 40.6% from the floor.

Scout Henderson needs to build on what he showed in the last 14 games of the regular season. Thrust back into the starting lineup, the former third overall pick averaged 18.9 points and 7.9 assists to end the year. He also shot 39.5% from deep on 5.8 attempts per game. Henderson is likely coming off the bench to start the season, but if he continues on that path he will find himself back in the starting lineup sooner rather than later.

This team has an oddly high floor because of the presence of veterans like Jerami Grant and Deandre Ayton. If the Trail Blazers' shot selection improves and young players like Henderson continue their positive trajectory, the offense should improve. This still projects to be a below average team on both ends though, even if they climb out of the basement on offense.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

1000-1

CONFERENCE

600-1

DIVISION

600-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+3000/-20000

## OUTLOOK

**There are quite a few moving parts on this roster. One would imagine that Robert Williams – and perhaps Anfernee Simons – is on a different team by the time the season ends. Billups could be coaching for his job, which could mean leaning too heavily on the veterans, as opposed to letting the young players like Henderson, Sharpe, Avdija and Toumani Camara develop. This team's talent level is not as low as Washington, which could be an awful team this season. Still, I cannot trust Billups to get this team to exceed market expectations.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 22.5**



STEVE MAKINEN'S  
POWER RATING

98.5  
(#15 QF-30)

# SACRAMENTO KINGS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: PACIFIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 47-37 SU, 42-41-1 ATS, 37-45-2 O/U

Despite unprecedented success for the franchise over the last two seasons, the Kings were not happy. The Kings were eliminated in the Play-In Tournament last season, just a year after winning the most games since the 2004-2005 season. So, the franchise went out and acquired DeMar DeRozan from Chicago, in an effort to upgrade and pursue a championship.

On its face, the move to acquire DeRozan is an upgrade. In three seasons in Chicago, the veteran guard averaged 24.3 points, 5.2 assists and 4.5 rebounds and he shot 49.2% from the floor. He also improved the Bulls' net rating when he was on the floor in each of the seasons he was with the team. However, his fit in Sacramento is puzzling.

The current projected starting lineup for the Kings is DeRozan with De'Aaron Fox, Domantas Sabonis, Keon Ellis and Keegan Murray. There is not much shooting in this group. DeRozan is a career 29.6% shooter. Fox has shot 33.4% from deep for his career. Ellis shot 41.7% from deep on 2.9 attempts last season and 42.4% on catch-and-shoot attempts. That is a great percentage, but on a low volume. Whether he can sustain those numbers with an increased workload is not known.

Fox and DeRozan are both extremely effective shot creators and isolation scorers. Chicago averaged 1.1 points per possession when DeRozan isolated last season, and Sacramento put up 1.01 per possession with Fox. However, that will take a hit with defenses able to help off so many different options without the threat of giving up a look to a good shooter.

The bench looks somewhat different this season as well. It is still led by Malik Monk, but Chris Duarte and Davion Mitchell are gone. Jordan McLaughlin, Jalen McDaniels and Orlando Robinson are in to take their places. Kevin Huerter remains, as do Alex Len and Trey Lyles. The top eight has continuity, but after that the Kings will be fitting in new pieces.

There is a question as to how effective this team will be defensively as well. Sacramento was 18th in non-garbage time defensive efficiency last season (116.1). It was 25th in the same category the prior season. They did not add any one piece that would greatly improve the play on that end of the floor. It should be expected that this team is below average on defense once again this season.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

75-1

CONFERENCE

28-1

DIVISION

+280

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

-145/+120

## OUTLOOK

**Sacramento made a massive splash in the offseason when it acquired DeRozan, but it did not make itself better. The addition brought with it questions about the offense, and how it will work with DeRozan in the mix. Its biggest weakness – defense – is the same, at best. The Kings will also have to deal with some scheduling challenges. They have no net rest advantage on the season. Sacramento will also have to deal with 16 back-to-backs, the most a team has this season.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

LEAN UNDER 46.5



STEVE MAKINEN'S  
POWER RATING

96.5  
(#21 OF 30)

# SAN ANTONIO SPURS

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 22-60 SU, 44-38 ATS, 39-41-2 O/U

Victor Wembanyama.

In reality, that should be the whole preview for San Antonio. The Spurs' French phenom was every bit as advertised in his rookie season. After he took over at center on Dec. 8 last year, Wembanyama went on to average 22.4 points, 11.0 rebounds, 4.4 assists, 1.2 steals and 3.9 blocks per game on 47.6% shooting from the floor. He won Rookie of the Year and finished second behind Rudy Gobert for Defensive Player of the Year.

Wembanyama is the odds-on favorite to win Defensive Player of the Year this season, and he is just 20-1 to win MVP. The expectations for the second-year center are out of this world, and the expectations for his team are mirroring that.

San Antonio won just 22 games last season. It was the second-fewest in the Western Conference. As of early October, 36.5 was the consensus win total for the Spurs. The team did add in the offseason. The notable names are Chris Paul and Harrison Barnes, both of whom are expected to start. But, are those two additions worth 15 more wins for San Antonio?

Paul averaged a career-worst 9.2 points per game last season for Golden State. He ranked in the 44th percentile at his position in points per 100 shot attempts (109.6). Paul still finished in the 100th percentile in assist rate (34.3%), but he is nowhere near the efficient scorer he once was.

Barnes averaged the lowest point total of his career since 2015-2016 (12.2). He did shoot 38.7% from deep and should give the Spurs a steady shooting presence at the wing, but he was a massive negative for Sacramento last season (-6.4 efficiency differential). There is a reason he and Paul were available for San Antonio to acquire.

The depth remains largely intact from last season. Devin Vassell will miss at least the first five games of the regular season with injury, so the Spurs will have to figure out what to do at shooting guard early on. Keldon Johnson, Jeremy Sochan and Julian Champagnie all fill out the usual roles. Rookie Stephon Castle is a good defender who could form some nasty defensive lineups with Wembanyama.

Still, it all comes back to Wembanyama. When he was on the floor last season, the Spurs allowed 112.8 points per 100 possessions. They were only outscored by 3.3 points per 100 possessions. If he gets an increase in minutes as expected, perhaps he can play well enough to push this team further than he did last season.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

150-1

CONFERENCE

80-1

DIVISION

28-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+380/-525

## OUTLOOK

**It is really hard to realistically put so much on a second-year player and have it work out, but maybe Wembanyama is that special. His per 36 minutes projection this season has him averaging 26.1 points, 12.8 rebounds and 4.2 blocks per game. That stat line is good enough to win MVP, which many think he can. That would ultimately mean he can lead this team Over its win total and surpass market expectations. But, I can't get there. The additions San Antonio made in the offseason do not equate to an improvement of 15 games for me.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 36.5**



# TORONTO RAPTORS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: ATLANTIC  
2023-24 RECORD: 25-57 SU, 36-46 ATS, 42-39-1 O/U

The Raptors are coming off a tough year, finishing with a 25-57 record — and their worst winning percentage since the 2010-2011 season. Moving in the wrong direction forced the organization's hand in dealing Pascal Siakam and OG Anunoby, key contributors to the 2019 championship run, signaling a rebuild around Scottie Barnes. At Media Day, the Raptors acknowledged the need for patience, emphasizing that this project could be a long one. Despite this, Toronto's talent makes the team unlikely to bottom out.

Barnes, who signed a five-year, \$224 million deal in July, posted impressive stats last season: 19.9 points, 8.2 rebounds, 6.1 assists, 1.5 blocks and 1.3 steals per game. A versatile forward with length, Barnes can score in multiple ways and is an exceptional passer. His defense has been a work in progress, but given his college tape, there's optimism he'll improve. His shooting also saw a notable uptick, going from 30.1% from 3 as a rookie to 34.1% last season (on nearly five attempts per game).

The Raptors also strengthened their roster by acquiring Immanuel Quickley and RJ Barrett from New York in the Anunoby trade. Quickley averaged 18.6 points and 6.8 assists in 38 games for Toronto, positioning himself as the likely long-term answer at point guard. His scoring ability, especially from deep, combined with his shifty driving and world-class floater, makes him a key player alongside Barnes. The team clearly liked what it saw, as Quickley was inked to a fat new deal after the season. Meanwhile, Barrett, a Canadian native, thrived after returning home, averaging 21.8 points, 6.4 rebounds and 4.1 assists per game while shooting an efficient 55.3% from the field and 39.2% from 3. Barrett's improved shooting makes him a promising fit for Toronto moving forward, especially after his strong showing at the Paris Olympics.

A significant reason for optimism lies in the synergy between Barnes, Quickley, Barrett and center Jakob Poeltl. When these four shared the court last year, Toronto outscored opponents by 11.5 points per 100 possessions, a notable stat despite their limited minutes together. If that core group can build on that success, the Raptors could exceed expectations and compete for a Play-In spot.

Just how much Toronto outperforms expectations will depend on the performances of Gradey Dick and rookie Ja'Kobe Walter, the team's most recent first-round investments. The Raptors need more firepower on the wing, and both young players have the potential to deliver. Dick, despite an up-and-down rookie year, has the size and shooting ability to thrive in a complementary role. His off-ball movement and shooting could make him a valuable asset alongside Toronto's top players. Walter, who missed training camp due to a shoulder injury, is also a good shooter and a feisty defender, which should bolster the Raptors' depth.

In addition to these emerging talents, the Raptors' bench looks solid. Veteran Kelly Olynyk, known for anchoring strong second units, brings floor-spacing and playmaking ability. Meanwhile, Davion Mitchell, eager to prove himself after a disappointing stint in Sacramento, adds relentless point-of-attack defense and some sneaky offensive potential. Chris Boucher, a lengthy shot-blocker with 3-point range, can also contribute in short spurts. Even rookies Jamal Sheard and Jonathan Mogbo can help. Sheard is an awesome defender and a great table setter on offense.

The team's underrated roster is guided by head coach Darko Rajakovic, who arrived with high expectations after successful stints as an assistant with the Suns and Grizzlies. Rajakovic is considered a basketball genius with a bright future, and though his first year was rocky, there's belief he'll be the guy that guides this team forward.

Despite modest expectations, this Raptors team has the potential to surprise. With a solid core, emerging young talent and an innovative coach, Toronto might overachieve and make more noise than anticipated this season.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

1000-1

CONFERENCE

300-1

DIVISION

400-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+600/-900

## OUTLOOK

**While Toronto's front office executives and players downplayed the team's expectations for this season, this is not your standard rebuilding team. And the moves the Raptors have made over the last two years prove that. They could have prioritized youth and picks in the Anunoby deal, but they traded for two players that are firmly in their primes. They also moved valuable draft assets to bring in Poeltl, an elite rim protector that will be 29 when the season starts. Sure, Toronto might not be thinking about a championship, but this is a team that can and will be competitive. I'm going Over 29.5 games and honestly think they'll be closer to 35 than 30.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION

**BET OVER 29.5**

# UTAH

## JAZZ

CONFERENCE: WESTERN • DIVISION: NORTHWEST  
2023-24 RECORD: 31-51 SU, 42-40 ATS, 46-36 O/U

Any conversation about the Jazz begins with the team's youth. Ten players on this roster are 23 years of age or younger. There is plenty of solid veteran talent – such as Lauri Markkanen who signed an extension this summer – but the word out of Salt Lake City is that this season is about the kids.

If that is true, it makes projecting what this team will be this season somewhat difficult.

Utah only finished 17th in non-garbage time offensive efficiency (115.4), but that was undoubtedly its strength. Much of that offense was generated by second-chance opportunities. The Jazz finished second in offensive rebounding rate (30.9%), first in putback points per 100 missed shot attempts (26.0) and third in putback points per 100 plays (121.9). Markkanen, Walker Kessler and Taylor Hendricks are all very good offensive rebounders who finished in the 75th percentile or higher at their position in the category. This should be a strength of Utah's once again.

Areas of improvement for the Jazz this season will need to be turnovers and shooting. They turned the ball over on 15.6% of their offensive possessions; the highest rate in the league. That led to opponents adding 1.8 points per 100 possessions to their offensive rating in transition off steals. Utah also shot just 35.7% from beyond the arc and 34.3% on attempts above the break. It hit just 37.3% of wide-open attempts in the regular season.

Still, offense figures to be the stronger aspect of this team. The defense has a long way to go.

The Jazz allowed 120.9 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time last season. That was the most in the league. They only forced a turnover on 12.2% of their opponent's offensive possessions. That was the second-lowest rate in the NBA last season. Opponents averaged 20.8 uncontested 3-point attempts per game. That was the third-most allowed by a team.

Kessler and Hendricks have shown flashes on the defensive end, with Kessler being the most effective statistically. When he was on the floor, Utah allowed 3.8 points fewer every 100 possessions and opponents' shooting percentage at the rim dipped by 8.0%. Hendricks improved the team's defensive rating as well. If Will Hardy really does buy into the youth movement and these two develop as expected, this team could crawl out of the basement on defense.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

1000-1

CONFERENCE

600-1

DIVISION

600-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+1800/-6000

## OUTLOOK

**According to Positive Residual's strength of schedule metric, the Jazz have the seventh-easiest schedule in the NBA. They do have a negative net rest advantage on the season (-3) and they are among nine other teams with 15 back-to-backs; the second-highest amount a team will have this season. But, any analysis for this team's win total comes back to the youth and the construction of this roster.**

**John Collins is on a one-year deal with a player option. Collin Sexton and Jordan Clarkson have two years remaining on their deals. Which – if any – of these players will be on this roster by the time the season ends? During media days the team constantly hit on the need to develop the young pieces on this team. By season's end, this should be a young team learning to play together. That means a lot of growing pains. Hardy is a brilliant coach, but it is hard to invest in this team going over its win total with that in mind.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 29.5**

# WASHINGTON WIZARDS

CONFERENCE: EASTERN • DIVISION: SOUTHEAST  
2023-24 RECORD: 15-67 SU, 36-42-4 ATS, 43-38-1 O/U

The Wizards appointed Brian Keefe as interim head coach on January 25th after a dismal 7-36 start, during which they had the worst defense in the NBA, allowing 122.4 points per 100 possessions, with a net rating of -10.3. Under Keefe, things improved slightly, with the defense allowing 118.6 points per 100 possessions (27th in the NBA), and a net rating of -9.0. Opponents also shot only 34.5% from 3, the second-best mark in the league. These small improvements were enough for the Wizards to remove the interim tag and make Keefe the head coach. It also didn't hurt that this wasn't the most desired job in the world.

Keefe deserves credit for getting the team to play harder, but his long-term future is uncertain. The Wizards are in the early stages of a full rebuild and are likely to keep losing, which could eventually cost Keefe his job. For now, his focus will be on developing young talent and fostering good habits in his players.

The most critical player for Washington is Alexandre Sarr, the second pick in the 2024 NBA Draft. Despite a rough Summer League performance, where he averaged just 5.5 points per game and shot 19.1% from the field, Sarr remains a 7-foot center with quick feet and strong defensive instincts. He has the potential to be an excellent defender and, with his shooting confidence and ball-handling skills, he could develop into a versatile offensive player. His face-up game shows promise.

The Wizards also drafted Carlton "Bub" Carrington (14th pick) and Kyshawn George (24th pick). Carrington is a skilled on-ball creator with a knack for pull-up shooting. He should evolve into an instant-offense sixth man at the very least. George, a 6-foot-8 wing, is a reliable 3-point shooter with some ball-handling ability. His shooting prowess could earn him a spot in the rotation sooner rather than later.

Second-year wing Bilal Coulibaly will also play a significant role. Last season, he averaged 8.4 points, 4.1 rebounds and had flashes as a two-way player with his combination of length and athleticism. After spending time with the French national team this summer, a big leap in Year 2 could be on the horizon. If the Wizards improve in the near future, it will likely be due to the development of Coulibaly and Sarr.

Washington still has some veteran presence, particularly Kyle Kuzma, who averaged a career-high 22.2 points per game last season. A capable scorer who thrives in transition and from beyond the arc, Kuzma will likely be the team's top scorer again, though his defensive struggles can be frustrating. It also wouldn't be surprising if the Wizards move him at the deadline. Teams have been calling about Kuzma for years.

Jordan Poole is another key player, though his first season with Washington was inconsistent. Poole averaged 17.4 points and 4.4 assists per game but shot just 41.3% from the field and 32.6% from 3. His efficiency remains an issue, and his defense is nonexistent.

Newcomers Malcolm Brogdon and Jonas Valanciunas bring experience and professionalism. Brogdon, while injury-prone, is a strong 3-point shooter and floor general. Valanciunas remains a force in the paint and on the boards. Both will provide stability to a young and inconsistent roster.

Corey Kispert, entering his fourth year with the Wizards, is another valuable piece. A 38.3% 3-point shooter on 6.0 attempts per game, his floor-spacing and off-ball movement are vital for the team's offensive flow.

However, Washington's biggest problem is the lack of strong defenders throughout the roster. While Coulibaly and Sarr have defensive potential, they are too young to be relied upon consistently. Additionally, the team lacks efficient offensive players.

Overall, the Wizards are a team low on talent and structure, making them likely to remain near the bottom of the league until significant changes are made.

## THE ODDS

NBA FINALS

1000-1

CONFERENCE

600-1

DIVISION

400-1

PLAYOFFS (MAKE/MISS)

+2200/-8000

## OUTLOOK

**If you're thinking this total is too low for an Under, just know that somebody has won 20 or fewer games in each of the last six seasons. Last season, two teams failed to win 21 games, and one of them was this Washington squad. Losing Deni Avdija and Tyus Jones might not be huge blows because of the additions of Valanciunas and Brogdon, and the Wizards did add more talent than anyone in the 2024 NBA Draft. But this is still a team that is lacking in talent, motivation and identity, making it hard to expect a respectable season.**

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION  
**LEAN UNDER 21.5**