



NBA PLAYOFFS

BETTING PRIMER



THE CHASE IS ON

STRATEGIES FOR BETTING THE NBA PLAYOFFS

THIS FREE GUIDE INCLUDES

- PLAYOFF SERIES PREVIEWS
- NBA FUTURES AND BEST BETS
- TOP SEED DEEP DIVES

People have their complaints about the length of the NBA regular season, and “load management” often has bettors looking forward to the NBA Playoffs. Well, we’re finally into the most important part of the year, and the action should be captivating from here. Let’s just hope for some good injury luck from some of the league’s biggest superstars moving forward. We’re looking at you, Joel Embiid and Kawhi Leonard!

The “VSiN NBA Playoffs Betting Primer” should get you prepared for the first round of action, and you’ll also get a good idea of what you can expect from most of these teams the rest of the way. With that said, keep reading to find:

- In-depth analysis on the top seeds in the Eastern Conference, the Boston Celtics and New York Knicks, and previews of the 3 vs. 6 & 4 vs. 5 matchups (by VSiN NBA analyst Jonathan Von Tobel)
- In-depth analysis on the top seeds in the Western Conference, the Oklahoma City Thunder and Denver Nuggets, and previews of the 3 vs. 6 & 4 vs. 5 matchups (by Zachary Cohen)
- Best bets and futures from JVT, Zach, and VSiN senior producer/host Kelley Bydlon

JVT and Zach have been writing daily NBA articles for VSiN.com, and both will continue to provide analysis on sides, totals, and player props throughout the playoffs. That includes analysis for the Play-In Tournament games, as well as series previews of the 1 vs. 8 and 2 vs. 7 matchups in both conferences. So, when you’re done with this Primer, head over to VSiN for everything that wasn’t discussed in here.

You’ll also receive daily betting trends and analytics from VSiN Director of Analytics Steve Makinen. On top of that, you’ll find picks from our tremendous on-air talent on the VSiN Betting Picks page.

In addition to our written analysis, you can catch Kelley talking about the NBA on A Numbers Game from 7-10 am ET from Monday to Friday. And the same goes for JVT, who co-hosts VSiN Primetime from 6-9 pm ET every weekday.

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

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ALL STATS, REFERENCES TO STANDINGS AND ODDS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE



#1 BOSTON

There is no question as to which team was the best in the regular season. The Boston Celtics dominated the competition, and finished the 2023-2024 campaign with the third-best net rating in NBA history. Boston is balanced and dominant on both ends of the floor. It led the league in offensive rating (122.2) and finished second in defensive rating (110.6).

The Celtics' offense is driven by their shooting. They averaged the most 3-point makes per game (16.5) and ranked third in shooting percentage (38.8%). Four players – Sam Hauser, Jrue Holiday, Al Horford and Derrick White – shoot 40% from deep. Boston's high volume of shooting leads to some lopsided results, but it can also mean poor shooting nights turn into poor results. However, Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown are good enough isolation scorers to offset below average shooting performances.

Boston's biggest question will be how it performs in clutch time this postseason. In the last two playoff runs the Celtics have finished with a negative net rating in clutch time. Last season, they were outscored by 11.4 points every 100 possessions in clutch minutes. The season prior to that they had a -14.2 net rating. Boston finished the regular season fourth in clutch net rating (+15.4), but those questions will persist after it failed spectacularly in those moments the last two postseasons.

Still, the Celtics are the best team in the Eastern Conference without a doubt. They are odds-on favorites to make it to the NBA Finals (-180) in part because of the state of the conference, but mostly due to their dominance. Should chalk prevail and Boston meet Denver in the NBA Finals, it would be heavy favorites over the defending champions. At this point, it is safe to say that the Celtics' biggest obstacle on the path to a title is themselves. – *Jonathan Von Tobel*



#2 NEW YORK

It has been 24 years since the New York Knicks last made it to the Eastern Conference Finals. A season-ending injury to Julius Randle has certainly dampened the expectation that this team could end that drought, but the Knicks have enough tenacity to overcome the absence of one of their stars and make a run regardless.

The key to any success for New York begins and ends with Jalen Brunson. Brunson led the team in usage rate (33.6%) and averaged 28.6 points and 6.7 assists on 48.0% shooting from the floor. In his last 16 games of the season, Brunson averaged an insane 34.7 points and 7.4 assists on 49.3% shooting. He played 36.1 minutes per game over that stretch. Brunson will do anything and everything needed for New York to succeed, and therein lies the downside for the Knicks.

New York was outscored by 5.5 points every 100 possessions that Brunson was on the bench. After the trade deadline the net rating for the Knicks' bench dropped to -14.6 in the non-Brunson minutes. How Tom Thibodeau navigates these possessions in the postseason will be crucial for New York's success.

There is still plenty to be positive about though. The Knicks were dominant when Brunson was on the floor with OG Anunoby. The duo had a +18.1 net rating when they were on the floor together, and their most used lineup – which includes Donte DiVincenzo, Josh Hart and Isaiah Hartenstein – outscored opponents by 16.4 points every 100 possessions.

New York will outwork almost any opponent in the postseason. It is a high-volume shooting team which hits 37.3% of its 3-point attempts. The Knicks are also the best offensive rebounding team in the league (32.2%), which will allow them to generate plenty of second-chance opportunities. However, the team's dependence on a small guard and lack of bench production could be its downfall in the postseason. – *Jonathan Von Tobel*



#3 MILWAUKEE VS #6 INDIANA

The betting market has been steadily moving toward Indiana since DraftKings opened Milwaukee as -350 favorites to win this series. DraftKings is now down to -180 after Shams Charania reported that Giannis Antetokounmpo's status is in doubt for the beginning of the series.

Doubt surrounding Antetokounmpo's status is part of the reason this price moved initially, but doubt about Milwaukee in general is another force at work here.

The Bucks went 1-4 SU/0-5 ATS in five meetings with the Pacers this season. Indiana scorched Milwaukee's defense for 122.0 points every 100 possessions in those contests. Five games is a large enough sample size to draw some conclusions from, but both teams are strikingly different from when they last played. The Pacers have since acquired Pascal Siakam, and Doc Rivers is now the head coach for the Bucks. Both changes alter the math when it comes to this series, regardless of Antetokounmpo's health.

Indiana's biggest weapon against Milwaukee in the regular season was its transition offense. In five games the Pacers averaged 151.6 points per 100 plays in transition off live rebounds and 16.2 fastbreak points per game. Transition defense has been an issue for the Bucks, but they have improved defensively under Rivers. Since the hiring of Rivers, Milwaukee has allowed 3.6 points fewer per 100 possessions overall and 5.1 points fewer per 100 plays off live rebounds. The ability to defend in transition will be paramount for the Bucks, but the Pacers have changed the way they play offensively since they last met.

Indiana has slowed down its offensive attack since acquiring Siakam. Prior to the trade the Pacers began 33.3% of possessions off a live rebound with a transition play. They averaged 120.0 points per 100 plays. After Siakam joined the team that frequency dropped to 28.5% and their efficiency dipped to 113.7 per 100

plays. That would be the third-worst efficiency mark off live rebounds in the league had Indiana averaged that figure for the season. It is not guaranteed that the Pacers will be able to exploit the Bucks' shoddy transition defense in this series.

One also has to wonder about the health of Tyrese Haliburton. When these teams played their regular season series, Haliburton was at the peak of his powers. Against Milwaukee, Haliburton averaged 27 points and 11 assists on 53.2% shooting. However, in the 36 games since he returned from a hamstring injury the Pacers star is averaging just 16.9 points and 9.5 assists on 45.4% shooting from the floor and 32.3% on 3-pointers. Haliburton's play at point guard was the driving force behind Indiana's success against Milwaukee. If he does not command the defensive attention he once did, this matchup becomes much more manageable for the Bucks.

It is easy to understand any doubt a bettor would have about the Bucks after watching the way they ended the season. The health of Antetokounmpo also looms over the series. If he cannot play in the first game, the probability of the Pacers winning this series increases greatly.

But, it cannot be ignored that Indiana is far from a perfect team. Haliburton is playing at a much lesser level than the one that allowed the Pacers to dominate the series with the Bucks. They are also a subpar defensive team that has allowed 116.8 points per 100 possessions in non-garbage time since acquiring Siakam.

The market has moved quite a bit from the opening price for the series, so those looking to back Indiana are far behind. It would also be foolish to lay the price with Milwaukee until the status of Antetokounmpo is known. The most likely scenario is that he is not ready for the start of the series, which puts the Pacers in an advantageous position. - Jonathan Von Tobel

LEAN: PACERS (+140)

EASTERN CONFERENCE PLAYOFFS



#4 CLEVELAND VS #5 ORLANDO

There are not many teams that ended the regular season in a more disappointing fashion than Cleveland. Coming out of the All-Star break the Cavaliers were 36-17 and in control of the second seed in the Eastern Conference. However, Cleveland went 12-17 SU/10-19 ATS with a -3.6 net rating in non-garbage time after the break. After a disappointing loss to the Knicks last season, the pressure is on the Cavaliers to do something in this series against the Magic.

It should be pointed out that the biggest factor in Cleveland's slide over the last 29 games was numerous injuries. Donovan Mitchell, Max Strus and Evan Mobley all missed at least nine games with injury. The most impactful absence was Mitchell, who has not looked right since receiving a platelet-rich plasma injection in his knee. In eight games since the injection, Mitchell has averaged just 18.5 points on 38.3% shooting from the floor. It goes without saying that if he is not right, the chances the Cavaliers can move on are minimal.

Orlando might not have experience, but it is an astounding defensive team. The Magic finished second in non-garbage time defensive efficiency, allowing only 111.5 points per 100 possessions. They forced turnovers on 15.6% of opponent possessions, and limited the opposition to a 24.7% offensive rebounding rate. Cleveland was 20th in non-garbage time offensive efficiency after the All-Star break (112.7) and 18th in turnover rate (14.2%). Those are not categories to struggle in when facing a team like the Magic.

Having said that, the Cavaliers are -195 favorites in this series despite the health concerns of Mitchell for a reason.

Orlando's biggest issue is its offense. It finished 22nd for the season in non-garbage time offensive efficiency (113.9). In

halfcourt settings the Magic averaged only 96.9 points every 100 plays. Their lack of spacing was the primary issue. Orlando took just 32.9% of their attempts from beyond the arc, and shot just 35.6% on those shots. It is a team that relies heavily on getting to the rim and the free throw line. That will likely be something it cannot rely on in this series.

When Cleveland has Jarrett Allen and Evan Mobley on the floor it allows just 112.5 points per 100 possessions. Only 32.1% of opponent attempts were at the rim against that frontcourt, and they shot just 60.4%. The priority on rim defense did allow a higher rate of 3-point attempts and makes, but over the course of a seven-game series it is unlikely Orlando can exploit that with its poor shooting.

The offense for the Cavaliers does have some weaknesses with both Allen and Mobley on the floor. They average only 112.8 points per 100 possessions when that frontcourt is on the floor, and it means playing with two non-shooters at one time. However, Darius Garland and Mitchell are 37% shooters. Strus hit only 35% of 3-point attempts this season, but he is a high-volume shooter, capable of knocking down shots at a high rate.

Cleveland clearly has some concerns. Its star player is unhealthy, and the offense has been inconsistent for months now. However, they have a defensive scheme tailor made to match up with the Magic. Strus and Georges Niang – along with Garland and Mitchell – give them an edge in shooting as well. Combine that with the ability to keep Orlando out of the restricted area consistently, and it would seem that this series price is accurate. The Cavaliers are not long for this postseason, but this matchup works too well in their favor to fade them in the first round. – Jonathan Von Tobel

LEAN: CAVALIERS (-195)



#1 OKLAHOMA CITY

People waited all year for the Thunder to cool down, but this team finished the season with a 57-25 record. Oklahoma City was a top-five team in both adjusted offensive and defensive rating, according to Dunks & Threes. Only the 64-win Boston Celtics joined them in the top five in both.

The Thunder are also a top-five team when it comes to halfcourt offensive efficiency. And they have the lowest turnover rate in the NBA, which has a lot to do with them having a ton of capable ball handlers. On top of that, they're the third-best 3-point shooting team (39.2%) in the league. In fact, Josh Giddey is the only rotation player that shoots worse than 35.0% from deep.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, who was second in the league in Estimated Plus-Minus (+8.8) and first in Estimated Wins (20.0) during the regular season, is one of the toughest covers in basketball. He averaged 30.3 points and 6.2 assists per game this year, and his ability to cook in isolation and hit difficult mid-range shots is one of the main reasons Oklahoma City is so dangerous late in games. And the tough part about guarding the Thunder is that Jalen Williams can do a lot of the same. When you throw in Chet Holmgren's ability to space the floor and finish at the rim, Oklahoma City has a legitimate Big Three.

Defensively, the Thunder allow the lowest field goal percentage at the rim (61.6%), with Holmgren's world-class rim protection setting the tone. And Gilgeous-Alexander, Williams and Luguentz Dort defend their butts off on the perimeter. The only place the Thunder are vulnerable is on the glass. They're the worst rebounding team in the playoffs, by far. But Oklahoma City is betting that it can beat opponents everywhere else.

Ultimately, the Thunder's postseason success could come down to Giddey. Teams are going to dare him shoot. If he's hitting, Oklahoma City can make a deep run. If he's not, the Thunder will have to pull him. But it's not always clear who should replace him.

This Thunder team also lacks playoff experience, as this is the youngest No. 1 seed in NBA history. But youthful exuberance helped make this team successful during the year. So, doubt them at your own risk. – Zach Cohen



#2 DENVER

The Nuggets lost as 13-point favorites against the San Antonio Spurs on Friday, April 12th. That ended up costing Denver the top seed in the Western Conference. But the Nuggets will still have home-court advantage up until the Western Conference Finals, and they were 33-8 at home during the regular season. Denver was also one of only four teams that finished in the top 10 in both adjusted offensive and defensive efficiency this year.

The Nuggets lost some pieces from the team that breezed through the NBA Playoffs and won a title last year. Bruce Brown was lured away by a two-year, \$45 million deal, and Jeff Green signed with the Houston Rockets. But neither one of those players is the difference between winning a title and coming up short. If Denver doesn't win this year, it would be because everybody else improved while the Nuggets stayed about the same. But the status quo is good enough for Denver to go back-to-back.

Denver's five-man lineup of Jamal Murray, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Michael Porter Jr., Aaron Gordon and Nikola Jokic is still one of the best units in basketball. The Nuggets outscored opponents by 12.0 points per 100 possessions with those five on the floor, and they were in the 99th percentile in offensive efficiency with that group. So, considering Denver will primarily be playing those five together, it's not a stretch to say that the title still runs through the Nuggets.

The reality is that nobody has an answer for Jokic. The big man finished the regular season fifth in Estimated Plus-Minus and third in Estimated Wins, and he's a heavy betting favorite to win his third MVP award in four years. Jokic is still capable of picking opponents apart from the post, whether it's by using his massive body and feathery touch to score around the basket, or by processing the floor and racking up assists at an outrageous rate. And the two-man game between Murray and Jokic is still the best in basketball.

The Nuggets also have championship pedigree now. They know how to win close games at this time of year, and they all trust one another to come up in big moments. You can't put a price on that. – *Zach Cohen*



#3 MINNESOTA VS #6 PHOENIX

For all of the concerns about the Suns, the team avoided the Play-In Tournament and got a favorable opening-round matchup. And Phoenix finished the regular season ranked ninth in adjusted offensive rating and 13th in adjusted defensive rating, according to Dunks & Threes. Also, after December 28th, the Suns went 34-18 and were top 10 in the league in both offensive and defensive rating. And they were seventh in the NBA in net rating in that span.

Once Phoenix got healthy, the team started to play some good two-way basketball. Sure, there were some peaks and valleys throughout the year — and they were drastic ones. But the Suns enter the postseason after having won seven of their last 10 games, and they did it against good competition. And Phoenix's final win of the season was a road beatdown over this Minnesota team, and both squads had something to play for in that one. But the Timberwolves had no answer for Bradley Beal, who scored 36 points in the victory. The win helped Phoenix improve to 3-0 against Minnesota this season.

This is just a very difficult matchup for the Timberwolves for a number of reasons. For starters, Anthony Edwards is used to being the best shooting guard on the floor. But a good argument can be made that Devin Booker is better than him. And Edwards is just 1-11 in 12 career meetings with Booker. Also, Edwards doesn't have running mates like Beal and Kevin Durant. Sure, Karl-Anthony Towns is a very good offensive player, but is he being utilized in the best way to damage the Suns? Towns has eaten inside against Phoenix in the past, but he now operates mostly on the outside when playing with Rudy Gobert.

The Beal dilemma is also a real one for Minnesota. Beal lit the Timberwolves up on Sunday, April 14th, and Minnesota better hope that was more of a fluke than a sign of things to come. But Beal has a significant size advantage over Mike Conley Jr., making him a tough cover for the veteran point guard. Perhaps the Timberwolves will counter that by turning to Nickeil Alexander-Walker, one of the best perimeter defenders in the league. But Minnesota would then be sacrificing quite a bit offensively, as Conley is the table setter for this young Wolves team.

Phoenix also struggled against teams that played fast this year. But Minnesota was just 22nd in the league in pace. So, outside of the occasional Edwards highlight in transition, the Timberwolves likely won't be looking to run the Suns off the floor. And that's going to play right into Phoenix's hands, as Minnesota is just 16th in the league in halfcourt offensive efficiency. That could let the Suns off the hook for being an inconsistent defensive team.

It does work in the Timberwolves favor that they'll have home-court advantage here. Minnesota can also sucker opponents into taking a lot of mid-range shots, and Phoenix can be a little shot-happy in that area of the court. But the Suns grew up towards the end of the regular season, showing off a healthier shot diet over the final 10 games. So, they likely won't take the mid-range bait. And overall, Phoenix should find a way to prevail considering the talent mismatch and favorable stylistic battle. — Zach Cohen

LEAN: SUNS (-115)



#4 LA CLIPPERS VS #5 DALLAS

There was a lengthy period in which the Clippers were the best team in basketball this season. From November 17th to February 5th, Los Angeles went 31-8 and averaged more points per 100 possessions (124.7) than any team in basketball. In that same stretch, the Clippers were a top-10 team in the league in defensive efficiency. But after the All-Star break, Los Angeles went just 15-13 and ranked 18th in the league in net rating before resting its starters in the final game of the regular season.

This has simply been a lengthy lull for this Clippers squad, and Kawhi Leonard missing the final eight games of the regular season with knee swelling only adds to the uncertainty heading into this series. James Harden's play also dropped off a cliff over the final two months of the regular season. And you can say what you want about "vibes", but the feeling surrounding this Los Angeles team isn't good right now — especially with the noise about Paul George bolting for the Philadelphia 76ers getting louder. Meanwhile, the exact opposite is true of Dallas.

After trading for P.J. Washington and Daniel Gafford, the Mavericks went 21-8 with the third-highest efficiency differential in the league before a meaningless game against the Oklahoma City Thunder on Sunday, April 14th. And prior to that outing, Dallas was first in the league in defensive efficiency over its previous 15 games. That gigantic leap on the defensive end suddenly has the Mavericks thinking championship, as we know a team with Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving will comfortably be able to score on anyone — and will be especially productive late in games.

The way these teams have played over the last two months almost make it impossible to learn anything from the Clippers being 2-1

against the Mavericks this season. These are just two completely different basketball teams right now. Dallas also happens to play a style of basketball that should be extremely successful in the postseason. Not only were the Mavericks second in the league in 3-point shooting frequency before the final game of the regular season, but they were also fifth in the league in halfcourt offensive efficiency and sixth in halfcourt defensive efficiency after trading for Washington and Gafford. So, Dallas can spread teams out with the 3-ball, but the team can also put defenses in a blender with Doncic running pick-and-rolls.

Beyond the numbers, it's a little hard to picture this version of the Clippers halting the Mavericks' momentum. Los Angeles does have a big advantage when it comes to the sidelines, with Tyrone Lue being one of the best X's-and-O's coaches in the league. He's also a magician when it comes to making game-to-game adjustments. But who on Los Angeles is staying in front of Irving over the course of seven games? And if Leonard isn't at 100% health, will the Clippers be able to take advantage of Doncic's lackadaisical perimeter defense? Also, will Los Angeles be connected enough defensively to make life on Doncic difficult?

The last time Doncic faced the Clippers in the postseason was in 2020-21 when he averaged 35.7 points, 10.3 assists and 7.9 rebounds per game on 49.0% shooting from the floor and 40.8% shooting from 3. He absolutely picked them apart in a seven-game battle that was won by the Clippers. But Doncic's supporting cast is a heck of a lot better this time around. He has never been surrounded by this much talent, and the pieces fit perfectly around him. — Zach Cohen

PICK: MAVERICKS (-110)

VSIN EXPERT NBA PLAYOFFS

BEST BETS

JONATHAN VON TOBEL

CLIPPERS (-110) VS. MAVERICKS

There seems to be very few who believe in Los Angeles in this series. Kawhi Leonard's status is unknown and the form of the team that romped through the NBA in December and January is long gone. However, Los Angeles quietly rounded back into form prior to the end of the season. Paul George averaged 25 points and 5 rebounds on 50% shooting from the floor in his last eight games. The Clippers are 2-0 in the postseason against Luka Doncic and deserve more respect here.

TIMBERWOLVES (+100) VS. SUNS

This is exactly what I expected would happen once we got to the postseason. Phoenix is highly regarded by the market despite one of the worst ATS records in the league. Minnesota did not play well in the regular season series, but Chris Finch gets time to prepare his defense. The Suns have not shown enough to deserve this respect. I'll take the series underdog with the best defense in the league and homecourt in the series.

KELLEY BYDLON

MAVERICKS (+110) VS. CLIPPERS

I think even if we knew Kawhi Leonard was going to be playing and 100%, I'd still be betting on the Mavericks. Dallas is 10-3 in its last 13 games with a +5.9 net rating, ranking 18th on offense and second on defense during that time. This team really did add the perfect pieces before the trade deadline with P.J. Washington and Daniel Gafford. Their defense is now championship quality, they have depth, a solid rotation of bigs, and one of the best duos in the NBA in Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving. Meanwhile, the Clippers have been sputtering a bit after looking like the best team in the NBA just a few months ago. They are 15-14 since the All-Star break and maybe most concerning, have a bottom six defense during that time. I like the Mavericks to win this series, and possibly win it easily. I'm considering adding some Dallas -1.5 games.

SUNS/TIMBERWOLVES 6 GAMES +190

SUNS/TIMBERWOLVES 7 GAMES +195

You can also go with Suns/Timberwolves Over 5.5 games, but this is all I had available to me. This is a fascinating matchup and far from ideal for Minnesota. I do still lean their way when it comes to winning this series, but I expect we see a long, drawn-out series. We all know the Timberwolves have a great defense, but they allow a lot of midrange looks and that's where the Suns can kill you. I expect both teams will be forced to make adjustments there, but also on the other side of the ball where Jusuf Nurkic will be under constant pressure from Minnesota's bigs. This should be a fun series to watch and I expect to at least see a Game 6.

ZACH COHEN

MAVERICKS (-110) VS. CLIPPERS

I went into this matchup at length in my series preview, but I figured I'll make it clear that this is a best bet for me. I just wish I got it in as early as Kelley did. Not only have the Mavericks been the best defensive team in the league over the last month or so, but their offense should give a slow-footed Clippers team all kinds of trouble. When you add in the fact that Leonard's health is a serious question mark, how can you not like Dallas?

PHILADELPHIA 76ERS TO WIN NBA TITLE (20-1)

It would have been nice if Joel Embiid didn't tweak his bad knee towards the end of the regular season, but Philadelphia is still worth a flier. This was one of the few teams in the league that was elite on both ends of the floor when everybody was healthy earlier in the year. And the Sixers have looked as sharp as ever since Embiid returned to action. And if Philadelphia wins its first Play-In Tournament game, the team won't have to worry about Boston until the Eastern Conference Finals. At that point, these odds would give you the ability to start hedging for guaranteed profit.