

NBA BETTING GUIDE

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TIPS & STRATEGIES FOR BETTING THE NBA

OUR PRO GUIDE INCLUDES

- REGIONAL TEAM COVERAGE
- MOST IMPROVED PLAYER BEST BET
- STEVE MAKINEN'S POWER RATINGS

SPORTS RADIO
THE GAMBLER
1230 • 98.7 HD2

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

CAN KELLEY IMPROVE AGAIN? BETTING MOST IMPROVED PLAYER

by Kelley Bydlon

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

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

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

WHAT DID I MISS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE PROFILE I'M STILL BETTING

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

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

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

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

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

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

That creates an opening elsewhere on the board.

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

MY FAVORITE BET: MATAS BUZELIS, 40-1

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

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

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

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

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

STEVE MAKINEN'S POWER RATINGS

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



MIAMI HEAT

EASTERN • SOUTHEAST

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

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

33-1

NBA FINALS

+850

CONFERENCE

+135

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 99 (#13 OF 30)

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

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

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

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

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

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

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

2.0
#13

ADJUSTED NET RATING

115.8
#12

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

113.9
#13

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

How will Giannis and Bam coexist offensively?

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

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

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

Do the Heat have enough backcourt juice?

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

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

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

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

Should Miami actually be taken seriously as a title contender?

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

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

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

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
OVER 45.5

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





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