

NBA BETTING GUIDE

VSiN **PRO**



TIPS & STRATEGIES FOR BETTING THE NBA

OUR PRO GUIDE INCLUDES

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



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



DETROIT PISTONS

EASTERN • CENTRAL

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

Circa | SPORTS
ODDS TO WIN...

40-1

NBA FINALS

11-1

CONFERENCE

+150

DIVISION

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATING 101 (#6 OF 30)

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

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

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

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

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

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

'25-'26 ADVANCED STATS

7.6

#3

ADJUSTED NET RATING

117.1

#9

ADJUSTED OFFENSIVE RATING

109.5

#2

ADJUSTED DEFENSIVE RATING

THREE BURNING QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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

Does this team have enough firepower?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WIN TOTAL PREDICTION
UNDER 49.5

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





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