**2015-16 NBA Season Preview and Predictions**

The 2015-16 NBA regular season tips off this Tuesday evening, and to celebrate, here is Wash U Sports Analytics’ primer for the season. We’ll give predictions for following categories: end of year conference standings, All-NBA teams, end of season awards, and playoff. Without further ado, let’s begin.

**Eastern Conference**

1. Cleveland Cavaliers

2. Chicago Bulls

3. Atlanta Hawks

4. Toronto Raptors

5. Miami Heat

6. Washington Wizards

7. Milwaukee Bucks

8. Indiana Pacers

9. Boston Celtics

10. Detroit Pistons

11. Brooklyn Nets

12. New York Knicks

13. Orlando Magic

14. Charlotte Bobcats

15. Philadelphia 76ers

-Few things are guaranteed in the NBA, but the Cavs as the #1 seed looks about as sure as anything in the league. No other team in the East can field a starting 5 as talented as Cleveland, and the Cavs’ bench got even deeper this offseason after the re-signing of Tristan Thompson and J.R Smith, the return of Anderson Varejao from injury, and the signing of Mo Williams. Once everyone on the team returns to full strength, it should be smooth sailing for Cleveland.

-Seeds #2-5 look to be pretty interchangeable; the Bulls look to be the most formidable threat to Cleveland, assuming Derrick Rose can stay healthy and Jimmy Butler can continue his ascent to stardom from last season. Hawks fans can be optimistic that their team will make the playoffs again this year; they finished last season in the top 6 in offensive and defensive rating, per basketball-reference.com. However, they can expect a dip in that production after losing Demarre Carroll to the Raptors. Toronto will always hover around the top half of the Eastern Conference, as they play in the weakest division in the NBA (the basketball equivalent of the Indianapolis Colts). Look out for Jonas Valanciunas, who is entering a contract year and looks poised for a breakout season. Finally, the Miami Heat look to have one of the biggest ranges in terms of where they could end the season. If Hassan Whiteside can average a double-double and 3 BPG for a season and if Goran Dragic can continue to shoot at 50% from the field, the Heat could make a run at the NBA Finals. However, Whiteside ends up being a flash in the pan and Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh succumb to injuries, it could be a long season in South Beach.

-I fear I might be short-changing the Wizards a bit. John Wall is going to end the season as one of the 4 best point guards in the league, and Bradley Beal and Otto Porter Jr. appear ready to contribute more significantly to Washington’s offense. I might be a little overly optimistic, but I’m sure everyone in that organization is motivated to play harder, knowing that they could land Kevin Durant next summer.

-The Bucks will be good this year, but they’re more of a work-in-progress than anything else. Though, there is a lot to be excited about for Milwaukee this year: [new uniforms](http://www.nba.com/bucks/release/bucks-unveil-new-home-and-road-uniforms), the Greek Freak at the 5, and the return/arrival of Jabari Parker. They may not be a threat this year, but if I was a new NBA fan and was looking for an under-the-radar team to root for, this would be my pick.

-To me, the #8 seed is a coin toss between Indiana and Boston. Ultimately, I decided to go with the Pacers, banking on Paul George to have a strong season coming off injury, which may be foolish given Frank Vogel’s [plans for George this season](http://grantland.com/the-triangle/answering-some-questions-about-paul-george-playing-power-forward/).

-The rest of the East is lined with teams who are either re-building or hopeless. Unless you’re a devoted fan of one of these teams, interested in the intricacies of long-term tanking, or curious to see how some rookies will develop (I’m still deciding between whether I’m more excited to see Kristaps or Frank the Tank in the NBA), there isn’t much to see here.

**Western Conference**

1. Los Angeles Clippers

2. Golden State Warriors

3. Houston Rockets

4. Oklahoma City Thunder

5. San Antonio Spurs

6. Memphis Grizzlies

7. New Orleans Pelicans

8. Utah Jazz

9. Sacramento Kings

10. Phoenix Suns

11. Dallas Mavericks

12. Denver Nuggets

13. Los Angeles Lakers

14. Portland Trail Blazers

15. Minnesota Timberwolves

-Sometimes it’s lonely at the top. The 2015-16 Western Conference is not one of those times. There are 5 teams that all have legitimate shots at claiming the top seed in the West. I settled on the Clippers for the following reasons: they had the best offense in the league last season (112.4 points per 100 possessions last season), they beefed up their bench by signing Paul Pierce/Lance Stephenson/Wesley Johnson/Josh Smith, and they seem to have an increased sense of desperation after blowing it in the playoffs last season against Houston. Still, this team has a top 3 point guard, power forward, center, and coach. If they can’t get it done this year, it might be time to scrap the team and move on.

-The Warriors are going to be great this year, but it’s unlikely they’ll be historically great like they were last season. Still, although it’s said that one of the toughest parts about winning back-to-back championships is cultivating the same motivation to win again, I doubt Stephen Curry will have trouble [doing that](http://www.cbssports.com/nba/eye-on-basketball/25338431/steph-curry-i-apologize-for-all-the-accolades-weve-received-as-a-team).

-Houston improved by stealing Ty Lawson from Denver for next to nothing, and with Donatas Montiejunas coming back from injury, they look stacked from top to bottom. The only question is whether they can keep up defensively with the rest of the league.

-Oklahoma City might be the only team that can compete with the Clippers in the “desperate for a strong season” department, given Kevin Durant’s impending free agency. I do expect Durant and Russell Westbrook to both have monster seasons, though, and I predict that they will be the first teammates to finish in the top 5 for MVP voting in the same year since Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant did it with the Lakers in 2003.

-While the R.C Buford and the Spurs did win free agency this summer by signing Lamarcus Aldridge, I’m still a bit lukewarm about their chances to make a run in the West this year. Yes, Aldridge and Kawhi Leonard are two All-NBA talents, and yes, Tim Duncan has aged better than most fine wines. But Tony Parker struggled mightily towards the end of last season, and continued to struggle in this summer’s 2015 EuroBasket tournament, averaging 34.3 FG% for the tournament. The West is littered with the best point guards in the league, and if Parker can’t keep up, Gregg Popovich’s coaching might not be enough.

-The Grizzlies are coming back with the same team, failing to address their need for more shooting. Expect them to experience the same fate as they have the past few seasons: stealing a game or two early in a series before getting knocked out in the first or second round. Meanwhile, Anthony Davis will have another monster season (expect a PER near 30 again), and with the return of Jrue Holiday, the Pelicans have a legitimate shot to sneak past Memphis into the 6 seed.

-Utah, Sacramento, and Phoenix appear to be the only teams capable of contending for the final playoff spot in the West. If the Rajon Rondo experiment somehow works in Sacramento, then the Kings should thrive (I give it a 10% chance of success). Meanwhile, Gordon Hayward has quietly developed into a budding All-Star in Utah; he averaged 19-5-4 last season on 44.5 FG%, numbers which should improve this season. Also, I can’t wait for a full season of [this](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nB_SqxTOzAk) from Rudy Gobert.

-If the Bucks are the #1 under-the-radar team to root for, the Timberwolves should be #2. They have a plethora of young, exciting players that all could be 3-4 years from being a playoff team. Zach LaVine has many of the physical tools necessary to succeed in the NBA, but exhibited [poor shot selection](http://cdn.fansided.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/91/files/2015/09/Shotchart_1442934528895.png) in his rookie season. Furthermore, he had the worst defensive real plus minus in the NBA out of all point guards in the league last season. If he can become an average defender and improve his shot selection (both of which come with experience in the league), he can be an above-average player in the NBA.

**All-NBA Teams**

**All-NBA 1st Team**

Guard: Russell Westbrook, Oklahoma City Thunder

Guard: James Harden, Houston Rockets

Forward: Kevin Durant, Oklahoma City Thunder

Forward: LeBron James, Cleveland Cavaliers

Center: DeMarcus Cousins, Sacramento Kings

**All-NBA 2nd Team**

Guard: Stephen Curry, Golden State Warriors

Guard: Chris Paul, Los Angeles Clippers

Forward: Anthony Davis, New Orleans Pelicans

Forward: Blake Griffin, Los Angeles Clippers

Center: Marc Gasol, Memphis Grizzlies

**All-NBA 3rd Team**

Guard: Derrick Rose, Chicago Bulls

Guard: John Wall, Washington Wizards

Forward: Chris Bosh, Miami Heat

Forward: Kawhi Leonard, San Antonio Spurs

Center: Dwight Howard, Houston Rockets

**End of Season Awards Predictions**

**Most Valuable Player: Kevin Durant, Oklahoma City Thunder**

I know it’s been a long time since Kevin Durant has played a competitive game of NBA basketball, but I doubt he will waste any time returning to true form when OKC starts their season against the Spurs on Wednesday. Entering the final year of his contract with the Thunder, Durant has [not so subtly](http://www.sbnation.com/nba/2015/10/2/9440925/kevin-durant-los-angeles-lakers-free-agency-2016-stephen-a-smith) expressed his displeasure with the speculation regarding his impending free agency, suggesting a focus we have not yet seen before from the 27-year-old superstar. Durant is arguably the best scorer the NBA has seen in the post-Jordan era, and history shows that he is about to enter the prime of his career. As long as he can fight the injury bug, I expect him to dominate this season, averaging a career high in PPG and posting another 50-40-90 season.

*Honorable Mentions: Anthony Davis, New Orleans Pelicans; LeBron James, Cleveland Cavaliers.*

**Defensive Player of the Year: Rudy Gobert, Utah Jazz**

Lost in the shuffle of last season was the meteoric rise of Rudy Gobert, aptly nicknamed “The Stifle Tower” for his French heritage and incredible shot-blocking abilities. Standing in at 7’2”, Gobert has all the necessary qualities for a dominant rim protector: athleticism, agility, and a certain “f\*ck you” attitude that eliminates any fear of ending up on the wrong side of a poster. Barring any unforeseen injuries, Gobert should be a defensive force in this league for years to come, with the 2015-16 season being his welcoming party.

*Honorable Mention: Kawhi Leonard, San Antonio Spurs; Anthony Davis, New Orleans Pelicans*

**Most Improved Player: Bradley Beal, Washington Wizards**

There are many similarities between 2015-16 Beal and 2014-15 Jimmy Butler, the current-holder of the Most Improved Player award. Firstly, Beal is entering the final year of his rookie contract, as Butler did last year. Secondly, both have played largely in the shadow of their more accomplished backcourt colleagues (see: Wall, J. and Rose, D.). When looking at Butler’s 2013-14 stat line (13.1 PPG, 4.9 RPG, 2.6 APG, 46 FG%) and Beal’s 2014-15 stat line (15.3 PPG, 3.8 RPG, 3.1 APG, 43 FG%), we notice the difference between their respective games; Beal is a more prolific scorer, while Butler provides a more balanced all-around game. Beal has displayed flashes of All-Star potential throughout his career, and the tools are certainly there for him to make the jump. If there was ever a time for it to happen, this season is it.

*Honorable Mentions: Hassan Whiteside, Miami Heat; Enes Kanter, Oklahoma City Thunder*

**6th Man of the Year: Isaiah Thomas, Boston Celtics**

Although Lou Williams is the reigning 6th man of the year, Isaiah Thomas arguably had the more impressive season, edging out Williams in PPG, APG, RPG, and 3P%. Thomas saw his numbers improve significantly following his mid-season trade to Boston, and I expect the upward trend to continue in his first full season in Beantown.

*Honorable Mentions: Andre Iguodala, Golden State Warriors; Jamal Crawford, Los Angeles Clippers*

**Rookie of the Year: Jahlil Okafor, Philadelphia 76ers**

While he may not be the most promising defensive prospect, Jahlil Okafor boasts the most NBA-ready offensive skill set of anyone in the rookie class. Okafor will almost immediately be thrust into being the centerpiece the Philadelphia offense, with very few viable alternatives (here’s a fun game: try and name anyone on the 76ers roster not named Nerlens or Jahlil). While he may experience some normal rookie growing pains, it won’t be long before he becomes a legitimate offensive force in the league.

*Honorable Mentions: DeAngelo Russell, Los Angeles Lakers; Emmanuel Mudiay, Denver Nuggets.*

**Coach of the Year: Doc Rivers, Los Angeles Clippers**

There is an incredible amount of pressure on the Clippers to succeed this season, and instead of shying away from the spotlight, they have instead opted to paint a large target on their backs. Nevertheless, I expect the Clippers to thrive under the pressure, guided by an insatiable Chris Paul, and an even more desperate Doc Rivers, who could see himself on the hot seat if the season takes an unfortunate turn.

*Honorable Mentions: David Blatt, Cleveland Cavaliers; Kevin McHale, Houston Rockets.*

**Executive of the Year: R.C Buford, San Antonio Spurs**

The culture that R.C Buford has cultivated within the Spurs organization is one that teams around the league have tried (and failed) to emulate for years, and this offseason is further proof of the strength of that culture. Firstly, they signed former Finals-MVP Kawhi Leonard to the max deal that he certainly earned. Second, they were able to poach LaMarcus Aldridge, the marquis free agent of the summer, from Portland and sign him to a long-term deal. Lastly, they were able to ease the losses of Tiago Splitter and Marco Belinelli by re-signing sharpshooter Danny Green and signing David West, both at significant discounts.

*Honorable Mentions: Pat Riley, Miami Heat; Daryl Morey, Houston Rockets.*

**Playoff Predictions**

**Eastern Conference Quarterfinals**

1 Cleveland Cavaliers over 8 Indiana Pacers

2 Chicago Bulls over 7 Milwaukee Bucks

6 Washington Wizards over 3 Atlanta Hawks

5 Miami Heat over 4 Toronto Raptors

**Eastern Conference Semifinals**

1 Cleveland Cavaliers over 5 Miami Heat

2 Chicago Bulls over 6 Washington Wizards

**Eastern Conference Finals**

1 Cleveland Cavaliers over 2 Chicago Bulls

**Western Conference Quarterfinals**

1 Los Angeles Clippers over 8 Utah Jazz

2 Golden State Warriors over 7 New Orleans Pelicans

3 Houston Rockets over 6 Memphis Grizzlies

4 Oklahoma City Thunder over 5 San Antonio Spurs

**Western Conference Semifinals**

1 Los Angeles Clippers over 4 Oklahoma City Thunder

2 Golden State Warriors over 3 Houston Rockets

**Western Conference Finals**

2 Golden State Warriors over 1 Los Angeles Clippers

**2015-16 NBA Finals**

1 Cleveland Cavaliers over 2 Golden State Warriors