2015 NBA Finals Preview

Golden State Warriors (W1) vs. Cleveland Cavaliers (E2)

Game 1: June 4th, 2015, 9 PM EST, ABC

It’s finally here. The dream matchup that NBA fans were hoping for, with the two faces of the NBA squaring off for the Larry O’Brien Trophy. Before I delve into the matchups of this series and give our predictions, let’s first assess how we got here. Cleveland and Golden State have followed similar paths to get to where they are now in these playoffs. Both teams swept their first round matchups, as the Cavs breezed by the overachieving Boston Celtics and the Warriors defeated the New Orleans Pelicans. Each team then faced their toughest challenge in the second round, with Cleveland beating the Chicago Bulls in 6 games in a back and forth series that saw 2 game-winning buzzer beaters from former MVPs, while the Warriors won against the tough, defensive Memphis Grizzlies in 6 games as well. In the Conference Finals, the Cavs again swept their opponent, this time the #1 seeded Atlanta Hawks, while the Warriors beat the Houston Rockets in 5 games (in a series that likely would have ended in 4 games had it not been for a monstrous performance by MVP runner-up James Harden). Now, the Cavs are looking to bring a championship to a city that hasn’t had a sports franchise win a championship in over half a century (more on that later), while Golden State is aiming for their first title since 1975.

**Matchups**

As part of this Finals preview, I will compare the starters, benches, and other intangibles that can contribute to the outcome of the series and determine which team has the advantage in that category, Cleveland or Golden State. Some will be a bit more obvious than others (sorry, Harrison Barnes), so please, bear with me. Also, definitions of the more advanced statistical terminology can be found at the end of the post in the section titled “Glossary.”

**Starting Point Guard:** Stephen Curry (GSW) vs. Kyrie Irving (CLE)

Right off the bat, we have the matchup that I believe will make or break this series, featuring two of the best ball handlers in the league. In one corner, we have the 2015 MVP in Curry, and in the other is one of the most promising young talents in the league in Irving. Curry has continued his stellar regular season play throughout these playoffs, averaging 29.2 PPG (2nd best in the playoffs), 6.4 APG (9th best), and 1.9 SPG (7th best) thus far. What’s been more impressive, though, is the dominance that Curry has shown from beyond the arc; Curry has made 73 3-pointers this postseason (an NBA record) on 43.7% shooting, including an absurd 67% on corner 3’s. He is also leading the NBA in win shares (3.1) in the playoffs, and has the second highest PER (26.4), behind Anthony Davis, who was eliminated earlier in the playoffs by Curry’s Warriors. In short, Curry has been a nightmare for any team that has run into him this postseason, and he shows no signs of slowing down.

Opposite Curry is Kyrie Irving, whose first postseason has not quite gone as well as he would have hoped. Statistically, Irving has performed well, averaging 18.7 PPG and 3.7 APG. However, Irving was diagnosed with tendinitis in his left knee in the opening series against the Celtics that has visibly affected his play ever since, hindering his explosiveness that makes him such a strong scoring threat. Irving is widely regarded as one of the best finishing point guards in the league, meaning that a key component of his offensive skill set is his ability to drive to the basket and convert layups or draw fouls. It’s important to note that this injury hasn’t rendered Irving obsolete; he has still been shooting at above average levels, posting marks of 43.6% from the field and 48% from beyond the arc (both of which are better than Curry, by the way). However, a large part of that is due to Irving’s status as a premiere penetrator, as defenders must respect his driving abilities and therefore play slightly off him, giving him just enough extra space to knock down his jump shots. If Irving appears to be even slightly aggravated by his knee, expect Curry, Shaun Livingston, or whoever is defending Irving to smother him and prevent him from getting an open shot. The Cavs are fortunate to have 8 days off before Game 1 tips off in Golden State, and hopefully in that time Kyrie can recover. If not, Irving and the Cavs will suffer both offensively and defensively as he attempts to guard one of the quickest and most accurate shooters this game has ever seen.

*Advantage: Golden State*

**Starting Shooting Guard:** Klay Thompson (GSW) vs. Iman Shumpert (CLE)

One of the keys to the Warriors dominance this season has been the emergence of Klay Thompson as a certified star. This year, he improved every single facet of his game dramatically, averaging more points, assists, rebounds, blocks, steals and field goal attempts, all while improving his accuracy from inside and beyond the arc. The 2014-15 season has been Thompson’s coming out party, culminating with his first career All-Star nod, a 3rd Team All-NBA appearance, and a chance at a title, and he has continued his stellar play in these playoffs, averaging 19.7 PPG on 46% shooting from the field. Unfortunately for Thompson, he was diagnosed with a concussion after receiving a blow to the head in Game 5 of the Houston series. However, both Thompson and head coach Steve Kerr have assured Warriors fans that he will be healthy and ready for Game 1. Thompson is a vital part of Golden State’s offense, posing as a constant threat to erupt at any moment (just ask the Sacramento Kings after he dropped an NBA-record 37 points on them in one quarter). Furthermore, because Thompson is such a strong shooter (2nd most 3 pointers in the league, 4th highest 3P%), defenders constantly must stick to him instead of playing help defense when necessary. This is essential to the success of the Warriors’ offense, specifically the high pick-and-roll that Curry and Draymond Green like to run so much (more on this later). Although some are doubting Thompson’s health, I expect him to make a full recovery in time for the series, which likely does not bode well for Cleveland.

Tasked with defending the sharp shooting Thompson will most likely be Iman Shumpert, who, along with former sixth man of the year J.R Smith, was dealt to the Cavs in the middle of the season after Knicks management got frustrated with him not living up to his potential. Following the trade, Shumpert fit into the Cavs system nicely as a role player coming off the bench and leading Cleveland’s second unit. However, with the myriad of injuries in this postseason, Shumpert has been thrust into a starting role, where he has lived up to the challenge, posting 10.2 PPG, 5.4 RPG, and 40% FG% in 34.3 MPG. However, Cleveland likely did not trade for Shumpert because of his offensive prowess, but rather for his status as one of the premiere defenders in the league, a reputation he has lived up to in these playoffs. He is averaging 1.0 SPG and has posted a more-than-respectable 0.7 defensive win shares in the playoffs (for comparison, the league leader is LeBron with 1.2 DWS). At the end of the day, Cleveland’s offense will likely not live or die by Shumpert, but they will need him to knock down open shots as he has done thus far in the playoffs. More importantly, though, is that Shumpert plays a big role in their defensive scheme, and if he can contain Thompson (or Curry, depending on the situation), he will have fulfilled his role.

*Advantage: Golden State*

**Starting Small Forward:** Harrison Barnes (GSW) vs. LeBron James (CLE)

Like many of his Golden State teammates, Harrison Barnes has developed greatly over this season, and most of this is due to his increased role in the Golden State offense. Though Barnes is averaging the same 28.3 MPG as he did last year, he has usurped Andre Iguodala as the starting small forward, and started every game this regular and postseason as opposed to starting 24 last year. His offensive production and efficiency have increased as he’s improved his 3-point shot (39.9% last year, 48.2% this year). Barnes has shown promising offensive spurts throughout the playoffs, most notably in Game 5 against Houston where he scored 9 straight and 13 in the 4th quarter. However, like Shumpert, Barnes is not a top 3 offensive option for the Warriors, and will have a much larger defensive presence than offensive, especially when he is guarding LeBron. Barnes is still an above average defender, posting 0.6 defensive win shares and a defensive box plus minus of +0.7. Given the dominance of LeBron’s inside game and how mediocre his jump shot has been thus far in the playoffs, expect Barnes/Green/etc. to dare him to shoot, similar to the way Popovich’s Spurs did in last year’s finals. Kerr will likely take a page out of his old mentor’s playbook and have his players slip beneath LeBron pick-and-rolls, forcing him to beat the Warriors from outside rather than in the paint. If LeBron’s shots start falling, then Barnes will be in trouble as he will need to commit more to James, allowing James to penetrate easier; if not, then Barnes’ job will be just a bit easier.

Unfortunately for Barnes, there’s no way you can call your job “easy” when you’re facing a 4-time league MVP who seems to be playing with a chip on his shoulder. Once the ball tips on Thursday, LeBron will become the 33rd player in NBA history to play in 6 NBA Finals, though for James, that piece of history will be meaningless if it doesn’t come with the title he so strongly covets. In past years, many have compared LeBron to Michael Jordan, saying that an explanation for Lebron’s lack of finals success (2 for 5 in Finals series in his career) is his lack of a “killer instinct” that drove Jordan (a perfect 6 for 6 in the Finals). However, when asked earlier this week about how to stop Stephen Curry, LeBron calmly stated, “Well, the same way you slow me down. You can’t.” While many will read that as a well-deserved compliment to Curry, I read that more as an exclamation of confidence on LeBron’s part, almost bordering on arrogance. James has consistently preached the importance of patience to the city of Cleveland, but here, he is essentially telling his fans that he will do whatever is necessary to bring a championship home.

In typical fashion, LeBron has been dominant this postseason, posting 27.6 PPG and playoff career highs of 8.3 APG, 10.4 RPG, and 36.4% Usage%. Furthermore, he is among the top 5 in the NBA this postseason in most basic statistical categories: MPG, FGA, PPG, and APG. The more advanced statistics show a similar trend, as LeBron is tied for the league lead in value over replacement player and box plus/minus (both of which are shared with Curry), as well as being in the top 5 in win shares, defensive rating, defensive win shares. All of this leads to the point that, though Curry has the hardware to suggest otherwise, LeBron has been more valuable to Cleveland’s success than any other player has been for their team. As mentioned earlier, the only places where LeBron has seen a dip in performance are his jump shot and his efficiency. When LeBron last won a title with the Heat in 2013, he shot 43% from long-range 2 point shots and 38% from 3; those numbers have dipped this postseason to 33% and 18% respectively, despite settling for a similar number of outside shots as he did back in 2013. If he can improve his efficiency from deep, the rest of his game will follow suit. This goes without saying, but LeBron needs to continue his outstanding play in this series or the Cavs have no chance at winning their first title in franchise history.

*Advantage: Cleveland*

**Starting Power Forward:** Draymond Green (GSW) vs. Tristan Thompson (CLE)

Though he may not be as strong a ball handler as Curry, or as good a shooter as Thompson, Draymond Green’s versatility as a stretch-4 has been vital to Golden State’s offensive eruption this season. At 6’7” and 230 pounds, Green may appear woefully undersized for a power forward, and many expected that his talents would not translate from college to the more physically demanding NBA. However, he has fit perfectly into Golden State’s upbeat offensive tempo and, in a contract season, has made himself eligible for a near-max deal. What makes Green such an offensive threat is his transition play; averaging 10.8 RPG, Green can take these rebounds and quickly move up the court with the vision and skill set of a point guard. From there, he can either attack the basket (converting 63% of his attempts within 3 feet of the basket), kick out to one of the many sharp shooters on the Warriors’ roster (averaging 5.3 APG in the playoffs), or spot up from 3 himself (34% from beyond the arc in the regular season). For an historically efficient offense, things will be that much easier for Golden State if Green can continue to score the way he has so far this postseason.

And yet, I haven’t even begun to discuss his defensive prowess that makes Green so valuable; the DPOY runner-up has smothered his opponents in this postseason, as he is 5th in the league in steals with 25, has the 4th best defensive rating, and the second highest defensive win shares (trailing only LeBron). Although Green plays the same position as Tristan Thompson, he is arguably Golden State’s best defender and will likely match up with LeBron more often than not, especially after switching off pick-and-rolls. I expect Green to bring his trademark intensity and perform up to the task.

Similarly, Tristan Thompson is also in a contract year, and like Green, his play this postseason will likely earn him a large amount of money this offseason. Starting the playoffs on the bench, Thompson was thrust into the starting role in Game 4 of the Boston series the moment Kevin Love’s shoulder was treated like the ball launcher in Kelly Olynyk’s pinball machine. In his first postseason, Thompson is nearly averaging a double-double with 9.4 PPG and 9.9 RPG, and is wreaking havoc on the offensive glass, grabbing more offensive rebounds than anyone in the league not named Dwight Howard. He has maintained his strong 59.3% field goal percentage, but his free throw shooting has dipped notably from 64% in the regular season to 58% in the postseason. While these aren’t necessarily Howard-esque numbers, I would not be surprised if Kerr resorted to hack-a-Thompson in order to slow down a potent Cavs offense. Where Thompson will potentially struggle is on a Green-Curry pick-and-roll, one of Golden State’s favorite plays; he (along with nearly every other power forward in the league) is not nearly quick enough to keep up with Curry, making a switch a less-than-desirable option. Thompson could try to hedge the screen and force Curry to pass to Green, but as I mentioned earlier, Green is more than capable of either taking the ball to the hoop, passing it off, or taking an open 3 himself. Finally, Thompson can simply avoid the switch and try keep up with Green, but even then, he is not as quick as Green and will likely surrender several open jump shots to the Golden State power forward, a potentially problematic scenario. When Cleveland goes small and puts Thompson at center, he should be able to hold his own against Bogut or Festus Ezeli. Cleveland will need Thompson to hold his own on the defensive end to help neutralize the offensive threat that Green poses.

*Advantage: Golden State*

**Starting Center:** Andrew Bogut (GSW) vs. Timofey Mozgov (CLE)

Andrew Bogut’s career stat line does not look like that of a #1 overall pick: his 10.9 PPG, 9.2 RPG, and 1.6 BPG do not resemble the Shaq-like numbers people expected him to put up. Coming out of college, Bogut was lauded for having incredible footwork and the potential to be an otherworldly post player, while being criticized for his lack of defensive prowess. And yet, this season, Bogut has shined on the defensive end, posting the best defensive box plus-minus and the 2nd-best defensive rating in the league, culminating in him coming in 6th place for DPOY and being named to the All-Defense 2nd Team. When drafted by the Bucks, Bogut was expected to carry a large portion of the offensive load in Milwaukee, but couldn’t do so after being plagued by injuries for much of his tenure there. Finally, after missing 70 games in the 2011-12 season, Bogut was traded to Golden State where he slowly accepted a lesser role while developing into a premiere interior defender, a title that he has carried into the playoffs; Bogut is leading the league in postseason defensive rating, and is averaging 8.6 RPG and 1.9 BPG, while grabbing 19.3% of available rebounds when he is on the floor (3rd best in the playoffs). While this may not be how Bogut expected his career to pan out when he was drafted 10 years ago, he has quietly developed into an elite defender on one of the league’s best defensive teams.

Timofey Mozgov has undergone a similar reinvention in Cleveland; after entering the NBA with the Knicks, Mozgov was quickly welcomed to the NBA by viciously getting dunked on by Blake Griffin. Afterwards, the word “Mozgov” became a verb synonymous with being on the wrong end of a posterizing dunk. Despite showing promise in New York, Mozgov was traded to the Denver Nuggets as part of the Carmelo Anthony deal, where he spent much of his 3 years there on the bench. Then, when Anderson Varejao went down early in the season and Cleveland realized that they needed some interior defense, Griffin traded for Mozgov in what has now been called one of the best moves of the season. In Cleveland, he has blossomed in the starting role, averaging career bests in points per game, blocks per game, and field goal percentage, and has even become something of a [local celebrity](http://deadspin.com/timofey-mozgovs-local-commercial-is-an-all-time-great-1693864046). His strong play has continued in the postseason, as he has averaged a respectable 9.1 PPG, 7.2 RPG, and 1.9 BPG, including an impressive 83% from the free throw line. Mozgov is a solid post player, shooting 64% within 3 feet of the basket, and an excellent offensive rebounder. When he and Tristan Thompson are on the floor together, some of Cleveland’s offense will inevitably struggle due to his poor midrange game and the lack of spacing they cause, but they will be menacing on the offensive glass.

*Advantage: Push*

**Benches:**

Both David Blatt and Steve Kerr are not afraid to dip into their benches; both teams have 8 players averaging over 11 MPG (excluding Kevin Love). However, Golden State’s bench appears to be far more intimidating than Cleveland’s, anchored by former all-star Andre Iguodala and aging veteran Shaun Livingston. Although Iguodala comes off the bench, he still is a strong talent and would likely be a starter on more NBA teams than not, while Livingston is an above average backup that can penetrate and score with ease. Also, Festus Ezeli is a starting-caliber center with a strong post presence and soft hands who could breakout in a few years. Cleveland’s bench, on the other hand, has largely been depleted given Love’s injury and Thompson’s subsequent shift to the starting role. They have a strong back court duo coming off the bench in the eclectic but ever-entertaining J.R Smith (13.5 PPG, 46% FG%, 40% 3P%) and Matthew Dellavedova (7.0 PPG, 2.6 APG), who has done a nice job of stopping the bleeding caused by Irving’s injury. Smith constantly poses a threat to erupt offensively, like we saw in Game 1 of the Hawks series where he scored 28 points, including making a Cavs playoff record 8 3-pointers. However, the Cavs have minimal frontcourt depth, and in this series they will likely be forced to go small very often, meaning LeBron will once again have to play big minutes.

The analysts at FiveThirtyEight have [further confirmed](http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/where-this-years-cavs-rank-among-lebrons-nba-finals-supporting-casts/) my suspicion that without LeBron, this Cavs team is mediocre at best; based on multi-year statistical plus/minus talent projections, the 2015 Cavs are the 9th-least talented NBA finalist since 1985. Furthermore, without LeBron, the Cleveland supporting cast is the 3rd-worst team to reach an NBA Finals since 1985. This is both a testament to LeBron’s ability to carry a below-average team, as he did in 2007 with Cleveland and even last year in Miami, as well as a potential death sentence for the Cavs as they run into the Warriors, who are the 14th most talented finalist since 1985 by the same metric.

*Advantage: Golden State*

**Injuries:**

Assuming Klay Thompson recovers from the concussion he suffered against Houston, Golden State will have no injuries to deal with in this series. Cleveland, on the other hand, has been a popular victim of the injury bug. Prior to this series, Cleveland has lost Anderson Varejao for the season in December to a torn left Achilles, and Kevin Love for the playoffs after he dislocated his left shoulder in the first round against Boston. The biggest question mark hangs over Kyrie Irving’s head as he attempts to recover from a left knee injury he sustained in the first round against Boston. Although he has attempted to play through it, Irving’s game has suffered visibly in the past two series as he has lost his explosiveness off the dribble, and despite Cleveland’s best efforts to rehab him to full recovery, Blatt has said that “progress has been slow.”

*Advantage: Golden State*

**Head Coaches:** Steve Kerr (GSW) vs. David Blatt (CLE)

This NBA Finals hasn’t seen a rookie head coach since the Paul Westphal-led Phoenix Suns reached the finals in 1993. This year’s Finals, however, features two first-year head coaches against each other for the first time since the inaugural NBA Finals in 1950. Leading the Warriors is Steve Kerr, a 5-time NBA champion with the Bulls and Spurs and the runner up in this years’ coach of the year race. Kerr has done a remarkable job this season pushing Golden State over the edge, leading them to a franchise-best 67-15 regular season record and making Kerr the winningest rookie coach in NBA history. More impressively, the Warriors posted a remarkable 39-2 home record, tied with several other teams for the second best regular season home record ever held and one win short of tying the 85-86 Celtics’ 40-1 record. While some of that success can be attributed to the excellence that the Splash Brothers and co. have displayed on the court, none of that would have been possible if not for the work that Kerr and his staff have put in from the sidelines. Kerr has taken the lessons he learned when playing for two of the four most successful coaches in NBA history (Phil Jackson and Gregg Popovich), and has used them on his own players, resulting in a chance for him to cap off a stellar rookie season. It’s astonishing to think that it’s been just over a year since Kerr was deciding between coaching the Warriors or the Knicks.

I can’t think of a coach in recent memory that has been as heavily criticized despite showing the success that David Blatt has shown. Many forget that Blatt was hired two weeks before LeBron announced his return to Cleveland, meaning that when he accepted the job, Blatt was likely thinking more about rebuilding a struggling franchise rather than leading them to an NBA Finals. When Cleveland struggled out of the gate, starting the season with a 19-20 record, many called for GM David Griffin to fire Blatt. There were constant rumors circulating that he and LeBron couldn’t get along, that LeBron was the “true coach” of the Cavs, and that his players didn’t support him. And yet, despite all of the criticism, Blatt has continued to thrive on the Cleveland bench. Though this is his first trip to the NBA Finals, Blatt is a seasoned veteran in championship games, having won numerous championships overseas and coaching the Russian national basketball team to the Bronze medal in the 2012 London Olympics (interestingly enough, the starting center on that team was none other than Timofey Mozgov). Ultimately, the difference between these two coaches is marginal at best, as they are both incredible strategists who have done wonders with their teams, with Kerr having a slight advantage because of his prior experience as a player.

*Advantage: Golden State*

**Experience:**

This might be the most lopsided area of comparison in the entire series. The Cavs have a combined 17 finals appearances on their team: 5 for LeBron James, 4 for Mike Miller and James Jones, 3 for Kendrick Perkins, and 1 for Shaun Marion. It’s important to note that Miller, Jones, Perkins, and Marion have averaged a combined 27.8 minutes per game played, meaning this experience likely won’t translate to on-court production in the finals. However, they will surely play a huge role in the locker room and off the court preparing young players like Kyrie Irving, Tristan Thompson, and Timofey Mozgov for their first shot at a title.

Conversely, no one on the Warriors roster has been to an NBA Finals before, making them the first team since the 1991 Chicago Bulls to play for the NBA title with no prior finals experience. In fact, Leandro Barbosa is the only Warrior to have reached the Conference Finals before this year, having reached it in ’05, ’06, and ’10 with the Phoenix Suns. Nevertheless, this lack of experience didn’t seem to slow down the Warriors in their series against Houston, so it will be interesting to see how they respond to the pressure of the Finals.

*Advantage: Cleveland*

**4 Questions Before the Finals**

**Who is the biggest winner of the NBA Finals?**

Anyone who plans on watching the NBA Finals can consider themselves a winner with this matchup. That’s because this series has almost anything you could possibly ask for in a Finals:

The greatest basketball player in the world? Check.

The league MVP? Check.

A bevy of energetic, role players? Check.

A collection of players who shoot free throws well enough to eliminate any chances of “hack-a-whoever” ruining the finals? Check.

Redemption stories galore? Check.

The two best teams in the NBA since January 13 (when LeBron returned from his 2-week sabbatical)? Check.

One of the most exciting teams in NBA history? Check.

Two of the strongest fan bases in the NBA? Check.

The subplot for a franchise, where there is a legitimate chance that one of their Big 3 will leave in free agency for greener pastures elsewhere after you traded the current rookie of the year for him? Check.

More postgame press conferences with the adorable Riley Curry? Check.

Not one, but TWO franchises desperately in need of a title? Check and check.

Kendrick freaking Perkins? CHECK!

I’m sure you all are getting sick of me fan-girling over this series, but seriously, it’s going to be incredible.

*Advantage: Everyone!*

**Who is the biggest loser of the NBA Finals?**

You’re probably wondering, with all of the reasons I’ve mentioned above, how can there possibly be any losers going into this series? The simple answer is this: no matter the scenario, the Knicks always find a way to lose. Yes, the New York Knicks are the biggest losers of the 2015 NBA Finals, for several reasons. Firstly, because the Cavs and Dubs are one point guard short of making an ex-Knick starting 5 for the series, as J.R Smith, Iman Shumpert, David Lee, and Timofey Mozgov suit up for the Finals. Also, no disrespect to the Zen Master, but no matter who the point guard is (and maybe even without a point guard), this lineup would likely defeat any combination of 5 players from the 2014-15 Knicks.

Secondly, the Knicks are the biggest losers of these Finals not because of any stroke of ineptitude on their part, but rather by an unlucky assortment of ping-pong balls. As I mentioned earlier, Stephen Curry was drafted by Golden State with the 7th overall pick in the 2009 NBA Draft. After then-commissioner David Stern announced Curry’s name and welcomed him to the association, which team was put on the clock with the 8th overall pick? The New York Knickerbockers. Yes, the Knicks were 1 pick away from drafting Curry, but instead ended up with Jordan Hill, who ended up playing 24 games for the Knicks before being traded to Houston.

But wait, there’s more: not only were the Knicks thoroughly interested in drafting Curry, but Curry was equally, if not more interested in playing for the Knicks! According to a December 2014 [article](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/sports/basketball/stephen-curry-wanted-to-play-in-new-york-but-fate-intervened.html?smid=tw-share&_r=2) from the *New York Times*, Curry had publicly expressed interest getting drafted by New York, and Curry’s agent even went as far urging the Knicks to avoid expressing public support for Curry so as to potentially lower his draft stock to the point where fall to New York at the 8th position. In an interview, former NBA guard and Stephen’s father Dell Curry said “We felt that Stephen would fit perfectly with a coach like Mike D’Antoni, playing that fast, up-and-down style. He loved the idea of playing at Madison Square Garden.”

Interestingly enough, Steve Kerr has had a fondness for Curry since he was the GM of the Phoenix Suns and Curry was the NCAA’s leading scorer at Davidson College. The article goes on to detail that, as GM of the Suns, Kerr proposed a trade with the Warriors that would send Amar’e Stoudemire to Golden State for an assortment of players, cash, and the 7th pick in the NBA draft with the hopes of using that pick to draft Curry as a replacement for an aging Steve Nash (who Curry has publicly stated is one of the players he has modeled his game after). In retrospect, Kerr is fortunate that the Warriors balked at that trade, as he and Curry have teamed up into quite the formidable duo in Golden State. Furthermore, Kerr is fortunate to have avoided the train wreck of a coaching situation that Derek Fisher currently faces in Manhattan; instead of coaching the 2nd worst team in the NBA, Kerr has led the Warriors to the NBA Finals behind one of the greatest regular season performances the league has ever seen.

*Disadvantage: New York Knicks*

**Who has more at stake in these finals?**

I know this may seem like a bit of an overstatement, but careers will be defined by this series. Franchises will be defined by this series. Hell, cities could be defined by this series.

For the Cavaliers, this series has the potential to be the greatest moment of LeBron James’ illustrious career, because it could mark the point where his career comes full circle as he cashes in on a promise he made over a decade ago. Picture this: A city devastated [time and time again](http://grantland.com/the-triangle/finding-the-cleveland-misery-tipping-point/) is blessed with a hometown, once-in-a generation superstar. He wins two MVPs and carries his team to an NBA finals appearance only to be stifled by one of the 5 greatest dynasties in NBA history (Duncan’s Spurs). Then, he abandons the city that raised him in a rather ill-advised manner (See: The Decision) for Dwyane Wade, Chris Bosh, Pat Riley, and the warm beaches of Miami, creating his own mini-dynasty (4 consecutive NBA Finals appearances, 2 consecutive titles) and sparking the public outrage of owner Dan Gilbert in a Comic Sans-infested letter. Then, after losing again to the same dynasty that beat him 7 years earlier, James entered free agency unsure of his future, ultimately deciding to return home to Cleveland with aspirations of bringing a title to a city that hasn’t seen a championship since the Johnson administration. Now, it seems the entire city of Cleveland has forgiven LeBron as he stands 4 wins away from bringing redemption to the city that raised him. I would argue that, if the Cavs emerge victorious, it would cement LeBron’s status as one of the 10 greatest NBA players of all time, and would go down as one of the greatest redemptions stories in the history of sports.

On the other hand, there is certainly a lot at stake for the Warriors. Although the Bay Area is no stranger to championships (the Giants have won 3 out of the last 5 World Series, and the Montana/Young-led 49ers dominated the NFL in the 1980’s), the Warriors have not been as fortunate. In fact, ever since they won the NBA Finals in 1975, the franchise has been [borderline pathetic](http://grantland.com/features/how-annoy-fan-base-60-easy-steps/), riddled with missed draft opportunities, poor managerial decisions, and unfulfilled potential. However, that all changed on June 25, 2009, as the Warriors selected Stephen Curry with the 7th overall pick of the NBA draft. Curry has quickly developed into a transcendent NBA player with incredible ball handling skills, pin-point shot accuracy, in-the-gym range, and a lightning quick release, all of which combine to make him one of the most difficult players to guard in the NBA. Behind Curry’s MVP performance and the breakout of young talents like Klay Thompson, Draymond Green, and Harrison Barnes, the Warriors won a franchise-record 67 games with one of the league’s best offenses and defenses. A championship would simply be icing on the cake that has been the Warriors’ 2014-15 season.

Ultimately, I would have to say that the Cavs have more at stake in this series. Golden State is an incredibly young team that will only improve with time. Meanwhile, although LeBron has repeatedly urged the city of Cleveland to be patient, the Cavs front office has made moves suggesting that they are in win-now mode, such as trading for Mozgov, Smith, and Shumpert in the middle of the season. Furthermore, LeBron is not getting any younger, and with every passing year, the window of opportunity to win a title gets that much smaller. Finally, as I alluded to earlier, there is the overhanging threat that Kevin Love, a top 15 talent and perennial All-Star, will opt out of his contract and leave Cleveland for the open waters of free agency. Even though he had a down year compared to those in Minnesota, Love was a huge reason that the Cavs were so successful in the regular season, and a title would be an excellent selling point for Dan Gilbert and co. to convince him to return.

*Advantage: Cleveland*

**Who is going to win?**

At start of the season, Cleveland was listed as the favorite to win the NBA title, and were listed as 5/2 odds compared to Golden State’s 25/1 odds. However, this Cavs team has changed drastically over the course of the regular season and playoffs, with 3/5 of their starting lineup changing from Game 1 of the regular season to Game 1 of the Finals. According to Westgate, the Warriors are -270 favorites over the Cavaliers +230 for the NBA Finals, and the Warriors are 6-point favorites for Game 1. Finally, according to ESPN’s BPI rankings, the Warriors have a 72% chance of winning the finals compared to Cleveland’s 28% chance; the most likely outcome in which Golden State is victorious would involve the Warriors winning in 5 games (24% likely), while Cleveland’s most likely winning scenario would involve them winning in 6 games (12% likely).

Here are the predictions from the analysts of Wash U Sports Analytics:

**Robbie Steirn (President):** Golden State in 5, because “LeBron James is just as good as he was last year, and he is playing a team that is probably better than the 2014 Spurs. A questionable Kyrie and no Love means that LeBron is carrying the Cavs as shown with his extremely high USG%, similar to last year with a beaten up Wade. Thus, I expect a similar 5 game series like last year.”

**Michael Berkowitz (VP Marketing):** Cleveland in 6, because “LeBron is all that I know.”

**Austin Feinstein (VP Finance):** Cleveland in 6, because “Michael’s knowledge of LeBron’s name and his performance are extremely correlated.”

**Grant Goldman (Chief Strategist):** Cleveland in 7

**Jake Price (VP Operations):** Golden State in 6 because “Have you seen Steph’s 3?”

**Ben Eisenberg:** Golden State in 6, because “Steph is God.”

**Zachary Freedman:** Golden State in 6

**Andy Liu:** Cleveland in 4

**Will Nickerson:** Cleveland in 5

**Peter Rakita:** Cleveland in 6

**Lucas Schmidt:** Golden State in 7

Personally, I have gone back and forth several dozen times between Cleveland or Golden State in 6 or 7, and will likely do so several hundred more times between now and June 4th. Ultimately, I believe this series will be decided by Irving’s health, Barnes/Green’s ability to contain LeBron James, and the offensive production from Cleveland’s 3rd, 4th, and 5th options (i.e: Smith, Shumpert, Thompson, Mozgov, etc.). This series will be an offensive blowout between two heavyweight teams, and while Golden State has the advantage in so many facets of the game, I can’t bet against LeBron with confidence, fearful that under the immense pressure of this series, LeBron will deliver an otherworldly performance and carry Cleveland for one more series.

*Cleveland in 7.*

**Glossary** – defining all of the advanced statistical terms used in this article

Defensive Box Plus-Minus (DPBM) – a box score estimate of the defensive points per 100 possessions a player contributed above a league-average player, translated to an average team.

Defensive Rating – an estimate of the player’s points allowed per 100 defensive possessions.

Defensive Win Shares (DWS) – a metric that estimates the number of wins a player produces for his team solely based on his defensive production, calculated using full-season or postseason statistics.

Offensive Win Shares (OWS) – a metric that estimates the number of wins a player produces for his team solely based on his offensive production, calculated using full-season or postseason statistics.

Player Efficiency Rating (PER) – an “all-in-one” basketball rating that attempts to condense all of a player’s contributions and statistical performances into one number. The league average PER is always 15.00.

Usage% (USG%) – an estimate of the percentage of team plays used by a player while he was on the floor.

Win Shares (WS) – a metric that estimates the number of wins a player produces for his team, calculated using full-season or postseason statistics.