

# NBA retired players survey: On Steph, Giannis, LeBron, future stars, top coaches, rule changes, how the game has evolved

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Former NBA players are experts about the game of basketball. There's no one better to ask about how the sport has changed than the people who have actually lived it.

Before the 2021-22 season, *The Athletic* surveyed 118 former NBA players to learn what they're thinking about the game today. Who is the best player right now? Who will be the best player five years from now? Which current coach would they have most liked to play for? What rule changes should the league make? Has the increasing emphasis on the 3-point shot helped or hurt the sport? Who would've won a best-of-seven matchup between the 2020-21 NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks (<https://theathletic.com/team/bucks/>) and one of the greatest teams of the 1980s?

The National Basketball Retired Players Association distributed the survey to its members. *The Athletic* devised the questions without approval from the NBRPA. Respondents were given the option to share their names for inclusion in this story or to remain anonymous and disclose only the years they played. (For former players who wished to remain anonymous, we're only generally describing the time spans of their careers.) Almost all of the results are listed in percentages, and if the percentages don't quite add up to 100, that's because we rounded to the nearest tenth of a point.

Historically, the old heads always have had something to say about today's NBA stars.

Whether it's Oscar Robertson once taking a surprising shot at Stephen Curry ([https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/14870322/why-hall-famer-oscar-robinson-buying-stephen-curry-revolution](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/14870322/why-hall-famer-oscar-robinson-buying-stephen-curry-revolution)) or Shaquille O'Neal's discourse about Donovan Mitchell (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/jazz/donovan-mitchell/>) that inspired Kevin Durant (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kevin-durant/>) and LeBron James (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/lebron-james/>) to come to Mitchell's defense last season, it's nothing new to hear critical commentary from the ones who came before.

"Them old heads need to go enjoy retirement," Durant said then.

Or, of course, they could take part in this long-overdue, substantive exercise. As Charles Barkley told *The Athletic* last January (<https://theathletic.com/2351185/2021/01/28/charles-barkley-unplugged-is-inside-the-nba-too-tough-or-are-todays-stars-too-sensitive/>), when he remembered the time a late-night call from Kobe Bryant (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/kobe-bryant/>) led to a three-hour discussion about this very topic, players from different generations and eras won't always agree when it comes to hoop debates. But the least we could do is take the conversation well beyond the TNT stage where it so often resides.

In some cases, the former players' quotes were lightly edited for spelling and clarity.

## 1. Who is the best current NBA player?

### PLAYER



Kevin Durant (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kevin-durant/>)



LeBron James (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/lebron-james/>)



Giannis Antetokounmpo (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/giannis-antetokounmpo/>)

## PLAYER



Stephen Curry (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/stephen-curry/>)



Joel Embiid (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/sixers/joel-embiid/>)



Nikola Jokic (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nuggets/nikola-jokic/>)



Jimmy Butler (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/heat/jimmy-butler/>)



Kawhi Leonard (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/clippers/kawhi-leonard/>)



Russell Westbrook (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/russell-westbrook/>)



Zion Williamson (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/pelicans/zion-williamson/>)

44.2% — *Kevin Durant*

- “Durant is the best offensive player in the league. His offensive skills — jump shooting, ballhandling, free-throw shooting, offensive rebounding, passing, posting up, movement without the ball, basketball acumen — plus his height make him almost unstoppable.” — Marv Roberts, a forward who played five ABA seasons and also the 1976-77 season with the Los Angeles Lakers (<https://theathletic.com/team/lakers/>)
- “He has no weakness. He can beat you off the dribble. He can shoot over you. He can post you up. He’s 6-10, but he moves like a guard.” — a player who played from the mid-1980s to the mid-’90s
- “No one can guard Durant by himself. Durant’s 7 feet tall. Kevin Durant has been better than LeBron for at least five years. He proved it in two playoffs and never sweated.” — someone who played in the 1970s
- “His offensive skills make him impossible to guard by anyone in the league! He also has become a good passer and rebounder, and his ‘D’ has truly improved.” — a player whose career spanned the 1980s

- “His efficiency is peerless. He has more offensive tools than anyone except Michael Jordan and Kareem. His shooting percentages are awesome. He plays good defense too.” — Harold Keeling, a swingman who played for the Dallas Mavericks (<https://theathletic.com/team/mavericks/>) during the 1985-86 season

- “Kevin Durant’s unstoppable individually, which forces a double team or guarantees a quality shot over *any* opponent for the win during end-of-game situations.” — Bo Kimble, a swingman who played three seasons in the early 1990s, primarily for the Los Angeles Clippers (<https://theathletic.com/team/clippers/>)

31.6% — *LeBron James*

- “He is a leader, scorer, defender. He has size, strength, ballhandling and passing ability.” — a player who played in the late 1970s

- “He plays the game to win. Whatever is needed for his team to be successful, he is willing to provide it. Plus he is a role model off the court, and he gives back to his community.” — a player who played from the late 1980s to the early '90s

- “Do you even have to ask?” — Cedric Ceballos, a small forward who played from 1990 to 2001, primarily for the Phoenix Suns (<https://theathletic.com/team/suns/>), Los Angeles Lakers and Dallas Mavericks

- “He’s an all-around player. He makes his teammates better. He’s constantly improving and evolving his game and body.” — a player who played in the early 2000s

- “He is a dominant factor on both ends of the floor. He can play multiple positions offensively and can guard multiple positions on defense. He can score from three different levels, and he will also set up and make plays for his teammates. He makes the players around him better.” — Mark West, a center who played from 1983-2000, primarily for the Phoenix Suns and Cleveland Cavaliers (<https://theathletic.com/team/cavaliers/>)

13.6% — *Giannis Antetokounmpo* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/giannis-antetokounmpo/>)

- “He is the most unstoppable force in the game, and (I choose him) because he doesn’t run and switch teams because his team doesn’t have enough talent to compete. And he respects his teammates. That’s what you do to be a *real* MVP and champion.” — someone who played in

the mid-'70s

- “He lets his game do the talking.” — Harvey Catchings, a big who played from 1974-85, primarily for the Philadelphia 76ers (<https://theathletic.com/team/sixers/>) and Milwaukee Bucks
- “He is so gifted athletically, (has become) more skilled, plays hard, is great on both ends and has a tremendous desire to win.” — Paul Long, a guard who played three NBA seasons and one ABA season from 1967-71
- “He just won the 'ship.' He is great on both ends of the court.” — a player whose career spanned the mid-1970s to mid-'80s

3.5% — *Stephen Curry* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/stephen-curry/>)

- “No one will ever shoot or handle like him.” — someone who played from the mid-1980s to mid-'90s

*The Athletic's* takeaway: If Antetokounmpo can't get more love on this front after what he did in the Finals, then he'll probably have to wait for Durant and James to retire before he gets this (unofficial) crown from the retirees. Durant is a worthy pick, to be sure, and his latest postseason performance only underscored that fact. Ditto for James, although it's a little surprising that Antetokounmpo couldn't pass him here, considering the incredible way he led the Bucks past the Suns team that downed James' Lakers in the first round. This much is clear: No one can accuse the old heads of recency bias.

## 2. Which current player would you want taking a shot with the game on the line?

### PLAYER



Kevin Durant (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kevin-durant/>)



Stephen Curry (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/stephen-curry/>)

## PLAYER



Damian Lillard (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/blazers/damian-lillard/>)



LeBron James (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/lebron-james/>)



James Harden (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/james-harden/>)



Kyrie Irving (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kyrie-irving/>)



Khris Middleton (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/khris-middleton/>)



Giannis Antetokounmpo (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/giannis-antetokounmpo/>)



Jimmy Butler (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/heat/jimmy-butler/>)



Luka Dončić (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/mavericks/luka-doncic/>)



Klay Thompson (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/klay-thompson/>)

48.9% — *Kevin Durant*

- “He can get his shot against any defender, he knows how to get to his spots very well, and his shot-making ability is second-to-none.” — someone who played in the mid-2000s
- “Kevin Durant is unguardable. He is Kareem with a crossover and a jump shot.” — Cedric Ceballos
- “I always feel like he can create and make his shot whenever he wants. He gets exactly what he wants, and I am shocked when he misses, actually. He’s one of the best shot makers and scorers I’ve ever seen.” — a player from the early 2000s

33.2% — *Stephen Curry*

- “If the team can get him open with screens, I trust his jump shot over anyone’s ever.” — Harold Keeling

- “He’s an absolute stud, with the perfect temperament when it matters.” — a player whose career spanned the mid-1980s to mid-’90s

4.3% — *LeBron James*

- “I would want the ball in LeBron James’ (</player/nba/lakers/lebron-james/>) hands. He will make the best decision possible.” — Brian Scalabrine, a big who played from 2001-11, primarily for the Boston Celtics (<https://theathletic.com/team/celtics/>) and New Jersey Nets

*The Athletic’s* takeaway: The logic in picking Durant makes perfect sense, as he’s not only one of the greatest scorers of all time but someone whose length makes him nearly impossible to contest when he rises up. But here’s the irony: Durant hasn’t hit a true game-winning shot (defined by the Basketball-Reference.com (<https://www.basketball-reference.com/friv/buzzer-beaters.html>) folks as a shot taken with the shooter’s team tied or trailing, which leaves no time on the clock after it goes through) in nearly a decade.

It was Dec. 29, 2011, when the then-Oklahoma City star buried a deep 3 to beat Dallas ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wXqnGIc\\_7Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wXqnGIc_7Y)) with his future Golden State coach, Steve Kerr, on the TNT call. There have been plenty of game-deciding shots since then, of course, with none more memorable than his nearly identical daggers against Cleveland in Game 3 of the 2017 and 2018 Finals (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCPT0PoEyQg>) while with the Warriors (<https://theathletic.com/team/warriors/>). And if he’d only backed up a few inches in Brooklyn’s Game 7 against Milwaukee in the East semifinals last season, then his spinning jumper would have topped this list. Instead, it forced overtime en route to the Bucks surviving.

### 3. Five years from now, which current NBA player will be the league’s best player?

#### PLAYER



Giannis Antetokounmpo (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/giannis-antetokounmpo>)



Don’t know

## PLAYER



**Luka Dončić** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/mavericks/luka-doncic/>)



**Kevin Durant** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kevin-durant/>)



**Zion Williamson** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/pelicans/zion-williamson/>)



**Ja Morant** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/grizzlies/ja-morant/>)



**Jayson Tatum** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/celtics/jayson-tatum/>)



**Devin Booker** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/suns/devin-booker/>)



**Lamelo Ball** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/hornets/lamelo-ball/>)



**Cade Cunningham** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/pistons/cade-cunningham/>)



**Evan Mobley** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/cavaliers/evan-mobley/>)



**Stephen Curry** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/stephen-curry/>)



**Anthony Davis** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/anthony-davis/>)



**Jaylen Brown** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/celtics/jaylen-brown/>)



**Joel Embiid** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/sixers/joel-embiid/>)



**Jalen Green** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/rockets/jalen-green/>)



**Nikola Jokić** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nuggets/nikola-jokic/>)



**Donovan Mitchell** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/jazz/donovan-mitchell/>)



**Michael Porter Jr.** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nuggets/michael-porter-jr/>)



## PLAYER



**Russell Westbrook** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/russell-westbrook/>)



**James Wiseman** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/james-wiseman/>)



**Trae Young** (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/hawks/trae-young/>)

28.2% — *Giannis Antetokounmpo*

- “Giannis will still be the best player, because he’ll have improved while still being in his prime.” — someone who played in the mid-1980s
- “His 3-point shot will improve, and he will be unstoppable.” — a player from the 1990s
- “No one can stop him now, and he can only get better. He’ll win more championships.” — a player from the mid-1970s
- “He is a fierce competitor and recognizes his weakness and is working on perfecting them.” — Richie Guerin, a Hall of Fame shooting guard who played from 1956-70, with the New York Knicks and St. Louis/Atlanta Hawks

16.4% — *Luka Dončić*

- “(It’s) Luka, because he has the ball in his hands 89 percent of the time, so he has a high usage rate. Couple that with his shooting prowess and ability to get in the lane and play and finish in traffic.” — Grant Long, a power forward who played from 1988-2003, primarily with the Miami Heat (<https://theathletic.com/team/heat/>), Atlanta Hawks (<https://theathletic.com/team/hawks/>) and Memphis Grizzlies (<https://theathletic.com/team/grizzlies/>)
- “He’s already elite at 22, and in five years, he will be unstoppable.” — a player whose career spanned the mid-1980s to mid-’90s

4.2% — *Ja Morant* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/grizzlies/ja-morant/>)

- “He’s extremely talented and competitive and seems to have the ability to lead and make his teammates better.” — Mark West

- “He is A.I. 2.0.” — David Harrison, a center who played from 2004-08 for the Indiana Pacers (<https://theathletic.com/team/pacers/>)

1.7% — *Evan Mobley* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/cavaliers/evan-mobley/>)

- “A great defensive player.” — Michael Cooper, a wing who played from 1978-90 for the Los Angeles Lakers

- “Evan Mobley, and it won’t be close. ... I swear, the kid’s going to be a superstar in two more years. Mobley is unbelievable. Watch how he does things and his decision-making and his reach, his ability to see where the ball is. When you see it, you’re going to say, ‘Oh, my gosh!’ When he plays against other rookies, you can see the disparity.” — someone who played in the ’70s

*The Athletic’s* takeaway: This is all a matter of opinion, but the smart money is on Giannis. He turned 27 earlier this month and already has one championship, two MVPs, a Defensive Player of the Year Award and five All-NBA selections (three first-team) to his name. And as Guerin so astutely pointed out, it’s his willingness to work on the weaker parts of his game that make you wonder how much better he can get by the time the back end of his prime rolls around.

If the 22-year-old Dončić can keep his weight under control

(<https://nypost.com/2021/12/08/luka-doncics-weight-takes-over-nba-broadcast/>) and

commit to his own development, he’s more than capable of being that guy. Meanwhile, the retirees are completely ignoring 26-year-old Nikola Jokic

(<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nuggets/nikola-jokic/>)’s decision to do just that: trim

down and get better at a historic rate. It’s sheer insanity that the reigning MVP is the *16th* player listed.

#### 4. Which current player do you enjoy watching most?

## PLAYER



Stephen Curry (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/stephen-curry/>)



Kevin Durant (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kevin-durant/>)



LeBron James (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/lebron-james/>)



Giannis Antetokounmpo (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/giannis-antetokounmpo/>)



Damian Lillard (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/blazers/damian-lillard/>)



Luka Doncic (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/mavericks/luka-doncic/>)



Kyrie Irving (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kyrie-irving/>)



Russell Westbrook (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/russell-westbrook/>)



Nikola Jokic (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nuggets/nikola-jokic/>)



Kawhi Leonard (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/clippers/kawhi-leonard/>)



Zion Williamson (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/pelicans/zion-williamson/>)



Joel Embiid (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/sixers/joel-embiid/>)



Jrue Holiday: 0.9% (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/jrue-holiday/>)



Donovan Mitchell (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/jazz/donovan-mitchell/>)



Chris Paul (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/suns/chris-paul/>)



Michael Porter Jr. (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nuggets/michael-porter-jr/>)



Klay Thompson (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/warriors/klay-thompson/>)

## PLAYER



Trae Young (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/hawks/trae-young/>)

32.7% — *Stephen Curry*

- “He’s a pure player. He plays with joy. He looks like he’s having fun.” — Andrew Walker, a wing who played for the New Orleans Jazz during the 1976-77 season
- “He is the best shooter in the game, has outstanding ballhandling and passing skills, and the Warriors play more of a five-man offense than most teams.” — a player from the mid-1970s
- “In addition to his shooting range, his movement without the ball is outstanding.” — Ollie Johnson, a forward who played 10 NBA seasons from 1972-82
- “Curry impacts the game without even having a ball in his hands. I’m not sure we’ve ever seen that before.” — Brian Scalabrine
- “His shot is so pure that I think it’s going in every time he shoots.” — someone who played from the mid-1970s to the mid-’80s
- “He is the greatest combination of shooter and ballhandler in my lifetime.” — Marv Roberts

16.8% — *Kevin Durant*

- “To me, he’s an evolved George Gervin: bigger with more length, just as skilled a scorer, but with a lot more defensive prowess!” — Mark West
- “He’s so graceful. He’s 7 feet tall. He knows he can get his shot off on anybody, and he can get to a spot anywhere on the floor just with his skill set. The second player I like to watch is (Steph) Curry, because he’s a normal, average-looking guy: 6-2 or 6-3, not overly physical or athletic by any means, but he understands how to score and how to shoot the ball, and he’s gotten better in the last year and a half. ... Those two kids I love.” — someone who played primarily in the 1970s

11.1% — *LeBron James*

- “(He provides) leadership and a personal presence (on and off the court). That said, I really enjoyed watching the young big men in Phoenix and Atlanta during the playoffs.” — someone who played from roughly the mid-1980s to mid-’90s

4.3% — *Kyrie Irving* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/nets/kyrie-irving/>)

- “Kyrie Irving (because of his) ballhandling skills and shooting off the dribble.” — Eric Money, a guard who played six seasons from the mid-1970s to early ’80s, primarily for the Detroit Pistons (<https://theathletic.com/team/pistons/>)

3.8% — *Russell Westbrook* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/lakers/russell-westbrook/>)

- “Russell Westbrook because of his effort on a nightly basis.” — Vincent Askew, a swingman who played nine NBA seasons, most of them in the 1990s
- “His energy and effort is uncanny.” — someone who played the bulk of his career in the 1990s

*Comments on others who received votes*

- “Chris Paul (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/suns/chris-paul/>) because he is so crafty. He’s playing chess while most of the league is playing checkers!” — Steve Colter, a point guard who played eight seasons from the mid-1980s to the mid-’90s, most notably for the Portland Trail Blazers (<https://theathletic.com/team/blazers/>) and Washington Bullets
- “Jrue Holiday (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/bucks/jrue-holiday/>) because he does everything well without the fanfare or drama. (He’s) just extremely reliable.” — someone who played the bulk of his career during the 1990s
- “Joel Embiid (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/sixers/joel-embiid/>). He gets to do things I only dreamed about.” — David Harrison

*The Athletic’s* takeaway: It speaks volumes that Curry garnered more than twice the support of any other player. And while he will go down as the best shooter of all time, one who changed how we think about what is possible on a 94-by-50 court, the truth about his game is it’s so much more than that.

It's the Reggie Miller-esque off-ball action, the nonstop running off oscreens and firing away through the slightest opening on the other side. It's the ball skills that bring massive crowds (<https://ftw.usatoday.com/2015/12/watch-steph-currys-full-pregame-warmup-as-explained-by-him-and-his-trainer>) at home and on the road even before tipoff, then come in handy when he uses all that defensive gravity to flourish as a playmaker. It's the floaters, the artistry around the rim, and all the shoulder-shimmying dances that ensue from there (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUW0bo8hsXo>). Curry, who went from fighting for playing time with Acie Law (<https://www.nbcsports.com/bayarea/warriors/steph-curry-defends-james-wiseman-recalls-being-benched-acie-law>) during his rookie season in 2009-10 to this legendary career, is as electric and entertaining as they come.

## 5. Which current NBA coach would you have most liked to play for?

COACH	PERCENTAGE
Gregg Popovich	24.1%
Steve Kerr	20.3%
Doc Rivers	13.2%
Monty Williams	10.4%
Erik Spoelstra	8.5%
Steve Nash	4.7%
Nate MacMillan	3.8%
Tyronn Lue	2.8%
Quin Snyder	2.8%

COACH	PERCENTAGE
Mike Budenholzer	1.9%
Jason Kidd	1.9%
Tom Thibodeau	1.9%
J.B. Bickerstaff	0.9%
Rick Carlisle	0.9%
Dwane Casey	0.9%
Chris Finch	0.9%

24.1% — *Gregg Popovich* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/spurs/gregg-popovich/>)

- “Gregg Popovich because he’s a proven winner.” — someone whose career bridged the 1980s and ’90s
- “He seems to genuinely care for and authentically educate and engage with his players on and off the court. That’s rare.” — a player who spent the bulk of his career in the early 2000s
- “It would have been great to play for a coach that truly believes in player development, particularly as a young player.” — Ollie Johnson
- “The players have great respect for him as a coach, he communicates well and does not take any guff from the players.” — Richie Guerin

20.2% — *Steve Kerr*

- “I love coaches that don’t over-coach.” — Olden Polynice, a center who played 15 seasons from 1987-2005, most of them for the Seattle SuperSonics and Sacramento Kings (<https://theathletic.com/team/sac-kings/>)

- “Steve Kerr has a nice perspective and demeanor.” — a player whose career stretched from the mid-1970s to the mid-’80s
- “(He has a) massive amount of varied experience.” — someone who played the bulk of his career in the 1990s

13.2% — *Doc Rivers* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/clippers/doc-rivers/>)

- “I think he gets the most out of his players.” — someone whose career went from the mid-1980s to the mid-’90s
- “He is a former player at the NBA level, has had success in his Boston team winning the NBA championship and appears to protect his players.” — Marv Roberts

10.4% — *Monty Williams*

- “Monty Williams coaches how he would want to be coached. (He’s) encouraging, fair but hard, and knowledgeable about situations and X’s and O’s.” — Mitchell Butler, a swingman who played eight NBA seasons from 1993-04, primarily in Washington
- “He seems to be a great strategist, leader and teacher. He also seems to have a solid professional relationship with his players.” — Mark West

8.5% — *Erik Spoelstra* (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/heat/erik-spoelstra/>)

- “He holds guys accountable to a high level. (There are) no free passes in Miami.” — Brian Scalabrine
- “He values guys for their strengths and doesn’t get wrapped up in their weaknesses.” — a player from the 1990s
- “Erik Spoelstra is a basketball purist who is all about the team and nothing else.” — Johnny Davis, a guard who played 10 NBA seasons from 1976-86 for the Portland Trail Blazers, Indiana Pacers, Atlanta Hawks and Cleveland Cavaliers and went on to work as an assistant coach and head coach from 1990 to 2014

*The Athletic’s* takeaway: At least players are consistent — both the active ones and the retired ballers. When we did a robust survey of 127 anonymous players in April 2019 (<https://theathletic.com/909752/2019/04/08/the-2019-nba-player-poll-mvp-the-goat-most->



overrated-players-weigh-in-on-the-best-and-worst-in-the-game/) as a way of uncovering how they truly see one another, Popovich received four times the support of any other coach when it came to this very question. (Popovich garnered 40.9 percent of the vote, while Boston's Brad Stevens (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/celtics/brad-stevens/>), who has since moved to the Celtics' front office, had 10 percent.)

Popovich's championship track record speaks for itself, as his five titles are third all-time behind Phil Jackson (<https://theathletic.com/player/nba/knicks/phil-jackson/>) (11) and Red Auerbach (nine) and tied with John Kundla and Pat Riley. Of the 10 coaches who have at least 1,000 regular-season wins, Popovich has the second-best winning percentage (.664, trailing only Jackson's .704). And if you somehow haven't heard, "Pop" (1,320-669) is only 16 wins away from passing Don Nelson for first all-time in wins. So in other words, yes, he deserves all of this love and more.

**6. We're interested to know how the 2020-21 NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks would fare in a hypothetical best-of-seven series against a championship team of the past. Rather than ask you about more than one former champion, we've randomly picked one, the 1986-87 Los Angeles Lakers. Which team would win the series, and how many games would it take?**

WINNER	PERCENTAGE
1986-87 Lakers would win the series	95.7%
2020-21 Bucks would win the series	4.3%

- "The Lakers. I think it probably would have gone seven games, but I just think that the Lakers were so big and so talented that they would have been a matchup problem too. If the Bucks put Giannis on Magic, the Lakers could go to Kareem or they could go to (James) Worthy. They had so many guys to go to, and I don't think Giannis could have stopped Magic ... because Magic is as big as Giannis is. So I just think that with the other guys the Lakers

had, they had more depth: Byron Scott, Michael Cooper and Mychal Thompson and other various players in that range that were interchangeable. So my answer is the Lakers.” — someone who played against the 1986-87 Lakers

WINNER/NUMBER OF GAMES	PERCENTAGE
1986-87 Lakers in four	15.7%
1986-87 Lakers in five	45.2%
1986-87 Lakers in six	29.6%
1986-87 Lakers in seven	5.2%
2020-21 Bucks in four	0.9%
2020-21 Bucks in five	0.9%
2020-21 Bucks in six	1.7%
2020-21 Bucks in seven	0.9%

*The Athletic's* takeaway: Are you noticing a theme here? The old heads aren't ready to put last season's version of Giannis (and by proxy, his Bucks) among the truly elite. It's one thing to predict that those Lakers would beat the Bucks — we couldn't agree more. But the fact that nearly 61 percent of the retired players didn't think the Bucks would even make it to a sixth game says everything about their perceived place in the league's lore.

For the sake of comparison, those Lakers — ranked in this space the sixth-best team of all time back in May 2020 (<https://theathletic.com/1822805/2020/05/20/the-25-most-dominant-nba-teams-ever/?source=twittered>) — had an .800 combined winning percentage between the regular season (65-17) and playoffs (15-3) en route to winning it all in 1987. The Bucks (46-26 and 16-7) had a .652 mark. So maybe the retired players have a point after all.

No matter how you see it, raise your hand if you'd pay good money to watch Jrue Holiday try to check Magic Johnson in his prime while Antetokounmpo goes toe-to-toe with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar? Yes, please.

**7. 3-point shooting is a bigger part of the NBA than it's ever been since the 3-point line was introduced beginning with the 1979-80 season. Is the prevalence of the 3-point shot a positive or a negative for the current quality of play?**

IMPACT OF THE 3'S DOMINANCE	PERCENTAGE
Big positive	34.7%
Slight positive	16.1%
No change	1.7%
Slight negative	30.5%
Big negative	15.3%
Just different	1.7%

- “It’s some of both. It’s positive because guys shoot it so well that it’s always a threat and games are seldom out of reach. (It can be) a negative (if) it becomes an only option. Guys forget about other ways to score and start jacking up 3s.” — Phil Chenier, a wing who played from 1971-81, primarily for the Baltimore/Capital/Washington Bullets

- “I think it’s improved the game. It’s opened the door for more guys to play, because now all you’ve got to do is pick up the pace and find space. ... Now everybody is participating in (the 3-point shooting revolution): the catch-and-shoot, open looks versus contested looks. The pace of the game becomes important, because if you push it down the floor early, you give yourself a chance to score because the defense is not set. So there’s a strategy to it, and you have to have shooters in order to take advantage of it. So that brings back a lot of kids who are

too slow (and) maybe 6-3 or 6-4. It brings all of them into play. So I think it's a better game. You have more nationalities, more mixing. It's truly an international game. The pace of the game is a beautiful thing to watch." — a player who played predominantly in the '70s

- "It is just different. The game always evolves." — Detlef Schrempf, a forward who played 16 seasons from 1985 to 2001, with stints with the Dallas Mavericks, Indiana Pacers, Seattle SuperSonics and Portland Trail Blazers

*The Athletic's* takeaway: The older crowd is split on the 3-ball, and with good reason. The stretching of the floor that has come with today's game has certainly come with a cost, as traditional bigs who used to dominate the NBA landscape by operating almost entirely down low are no longer featured. And when it comes to shooting from deep, this groundbreaking era has taken the game to a place the marksman of yesteryear never could have imagined.

Consider this for context: Larry Bird, who was known as a pretty decent shooter in his day, never averaged more than 3.3 3-pointers attempted per game (1990-91). Even Ray Allen, whose all-time 3-pointer fell Tuesday to Curry, topped out at 8.4 attempts per game (2005-06). Meanwhile, Curry is currently averaging a career-high 13.4 attempts per game, and 11 players are either matching Allen's career-high in average attempts or surpassing it (<https://www.nba.com/stats/players/traditional/?sort=FG3A&dir=-1>).

## 8. Is the quality of play in the NBA today better or worse than it was during your career?

QUALITY OF PLAY NOW	PERCENTAGE
A bit worse	31.4%
A bit better	18.6%
The same	14.4%
Much better	12.7%

QUALITY OF PLAY NOW	PERCENTAGE
It's just different	11.0%
Much worse	10.1%
Not sure	1.7%

- “Not better. It’s just different. I feel we dealt with more physicality on the court. Today’s game is more open with more 3-pointers.” — Olden Polynice
- “Players are not playing every night.” — Al Skinner, a shooting guard who played in the ABA and NBA from 1974-80
- “Offensively, the players are better. Defensively? Not as much.” — a player whose career roughly spanned the mid-1990s to mid-2000s
- “It’s just different. The game has changed. Better athletes? Yes. Better basketball players?” — a player whose career roughly spanned the early 1970s to the early ’80s
- “It was more team-oriented then. We utilized the inside game more.” — Major Jones, a power forward who played in the NBA from 1979-85
- “The game has changed for sure. The part that’s worse is replays and the way the game is officiated.” — Jerry Sichting, a point guard who played from 1980-90, primarily for the Indiana Pacers and Boston Celtics
- “The game has become too commercialized, with even politics (mentioned), and some of the players don’t respect the game and the privilege of being an NBA player. They just want the money and the fame. The players don’t respect the game.” — a player who played in the 1970s
- “The overall skill is probably higher, but there’s less focus on the defensive end. That, paired with rule changes, give offenses a huge advantage.” — Dan Dickau, a point guard who played from 2002-08

*The Athletic's* takeaway: This question is entirely subjective, and the last thing we're about to do is tell accomplished former players why their view on today's game is off-base. To each his own opinion, we say.

Defense is certainly different these days, offense is drastically changed, officiating is far more complicated, and technology has slowed the game down when it comes to the replay component. But judging by the global growth of the game and the fact that the salary cap is on the way up again ([https://basketball.realgm.com/nba/info/salary\\_cap](https://basketball.realgm.com/nba/info/salary_cap)) even in the midst of a pandemic, the NBA must be doing something right.

To wit: The cap was \$35.5 million at the turn of the century and is now set at \$112.4 million. That's not too shabby for a league that was still running Finals games on tape delay in the early 1980s (<https://www.nba.com/news/nba-things-have-been-ghosted>).

## **9. What rule change — either a new rule or a change in emphasis — would you like to see?**

This open-ended question generated a flurry of wide-ranging responses, with many survey participants providing multiple suggestions. So instead of listing percentages for each specific area, we're conveying the total number of times each of the most-often mentioned areas appeared on the 118 ballots cast.

One of the areas six respondents suggested was preventing offensive players from drawing fouls through unnatural shooting motions. It should be noted that the league has made this suggestion a point of emphasis this season.

18 mentions — Eliminate traveling/palming

15 mentions — Allow more physicality from the defense

12 mentions — Crack down on flopping

10 mentions — Bring back hand checking

6 mentions — Preventing offensive players from drawing fouls through unnatural shooting motions

4 mentions — Follow FIBA's lead and allow players to touch the ball immediately after it hits the rim

4 mentions — Add a 4-point shot

- 4 mentions — End replay reviews
- 3 mentions — Eliminate the Euro step
- 3 mentions — Eliminate the traveling stepback
- 2 mentions — Extend the restricted area
- 2 mentions — Focus on calling moving screens as offensive fouls
- 2 mentions — Eliminate or reign in the 3-point shot
- 2 mentions — Eliminate load management
- 2 mentions — End “Hack-a-Shaq” fouling
- 2 mentions — speed up replay reviews

*The Athletic's* takeaway: We're sorry, what? We're going to just get rid of traveling and palming altogether? There's a sport where they do that, and it's called rugby. So while we certainly understand the sentiment from the voters, those rules do need to remain so as to avoid Antetokounmpo covering the court in four dribble-less steps (five, at most) or Chris Paul cradling the ball like it's made of pigskin.

Other than that, there are all kinds of interesting and worthy suggestions here. CC: Monty McCutchen, the NBA's senior vice president and head of referee development and training (<https://careers.nba.com/executive/monty-mccutchen/>).

**10. It's said the game is far less physical now than it was several decades ago. It's certainly much less of a low-post game. How would you have fit in with today's style of play?**

RESPONSE	PERCENTAGE
I'd be much more successful now	40.6%
I'd be somewhat more successful now	30.5%
There would be no difference	11.0%
I'd be somewhat less successful now	8.5%

RESPONSE	PERCENTAGE
I'd be much less successful now	4.2%
Other	3.4%

*The Athletic's* takeaway: Pro athletes are nothing if not confident, so is anyone surprised that 71.1 percent of participants said they'd be more successful playing today's game than they were back in the day? And rest assured, that comes with inevitable conversations among the retired crowd about all the massive paydays that would have come their way as a result. That doesn't mean they're wrong, but it's quite telling that only 4.2 percent humbly admitted they'd be less successful now.

*(Illustration: John Bradford / The Athletic; photos: Adam Pantozzi, Al Bello, Andy Lyons, Stacy Revere / Getty Images)*

**Boom! Glad you really enjoyed it.**



5 COMMENTS

Add a comment...

**William T.** 27m ago

Old heads survey





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**Amol G.** 22m ago

Did Russell Westbrook accidentally get sent this survey?



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**James H.** 19m ago

Great article, but I wish more of the players had allowed their names to be given.



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**Thomas L.** 15m ago

For it being a survey of players from previous decades, it's interesting they picked KD over Giannis even though Giannis arguably has a more physical "old school" game. Saying this as a KD fan. I think if Giannis gets another ring or two this conversation will shift his way, same with someone like Jokic. I'm actually surprised how conventional most of these answers are.



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**Joseph M.** 6m ago

LMAO at #8 and #10. Never change former NBA players.



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