

NBA: East vs West Analysis

Scope of the past 25 years to determine which conference is stronger

Jacob Petrosch

Intro

When I turned 25 this past year, I thought, “wow, a quarter century I’ve been alive”. I thought back to past memories throughout my lifetime, and I realized a lot of it included basketball. Whether it was playing outside, playing NBA 2K on my Xbox, or watching the 76ers fail as an organization throughout the years, (kind of joking) basketball has been a part of my life forever.

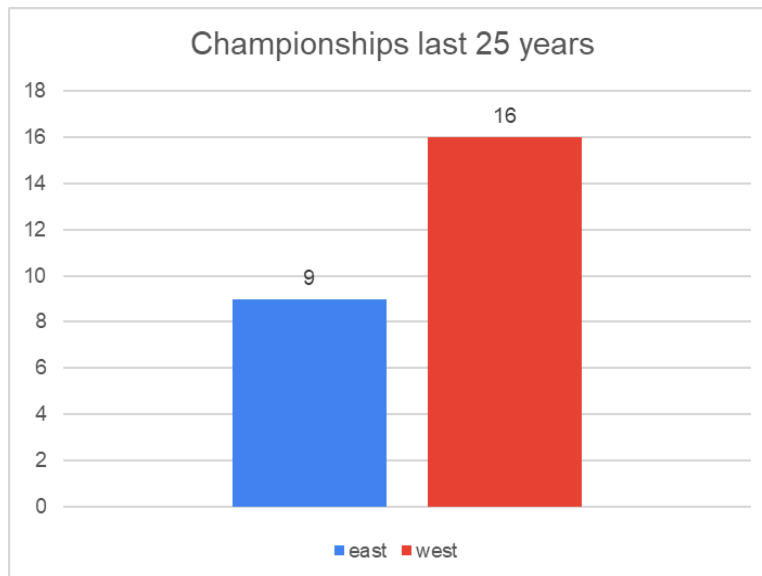
Hypothesis

As a kid, the western teams always seemed stronger than the east, especially in the playoffs. You had your Spurs, Lakers, even the Kings were really good in the early 2000s. So I decided to test this theory by comparing the two conferences (east vs. west) for the past quarter century (2000-2025). This will be only conducted on behalf of the teams who make the playoffs in their respective conference each season.

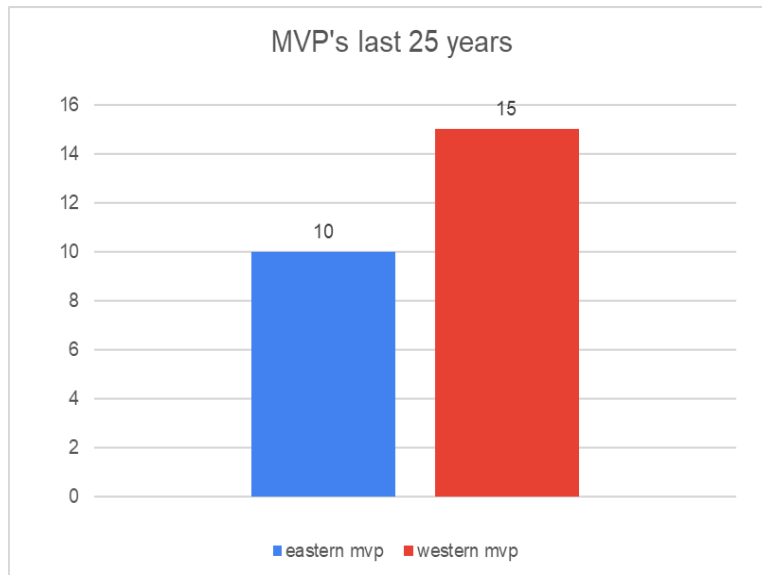
Methodology

For this analysis, I explored several key areas: the number of championships won, MVP awards, and the total number of All-NBA selections by each conference. I also uncovered some additional insights that added interesting context to the findings. All data has been compiled in spreadsheets using pivot tables and charts to create clear visualizations. The dataset spans from the 2000 season onward, sourced from Basketball-Reference.com.

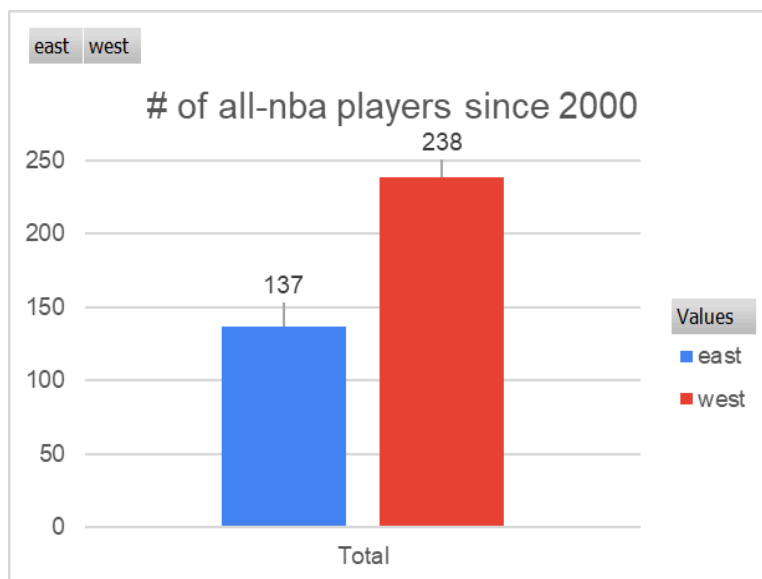
Results / Analysis



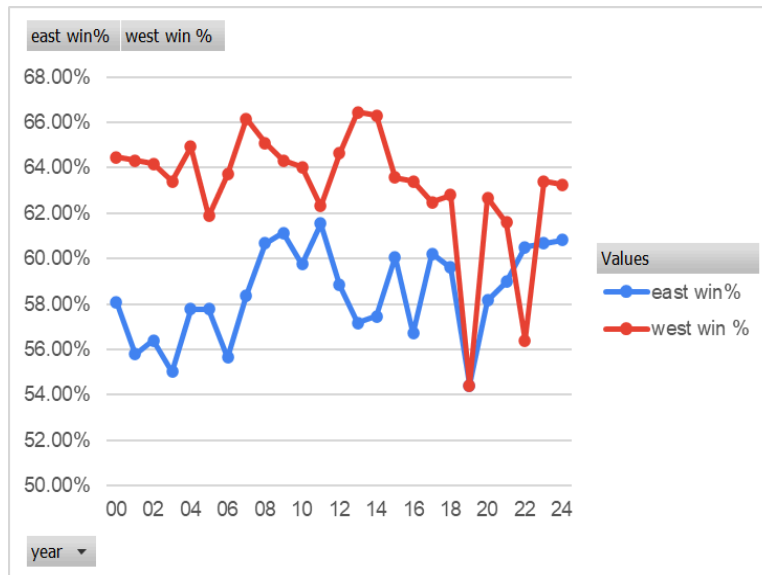
With the Oklahoma City Thunder winning the last Finals matchup against the Indiana Pacers, the west has come away with 16 of the past 25 championships. That’s 64%. That is a mighty advantage over the east.



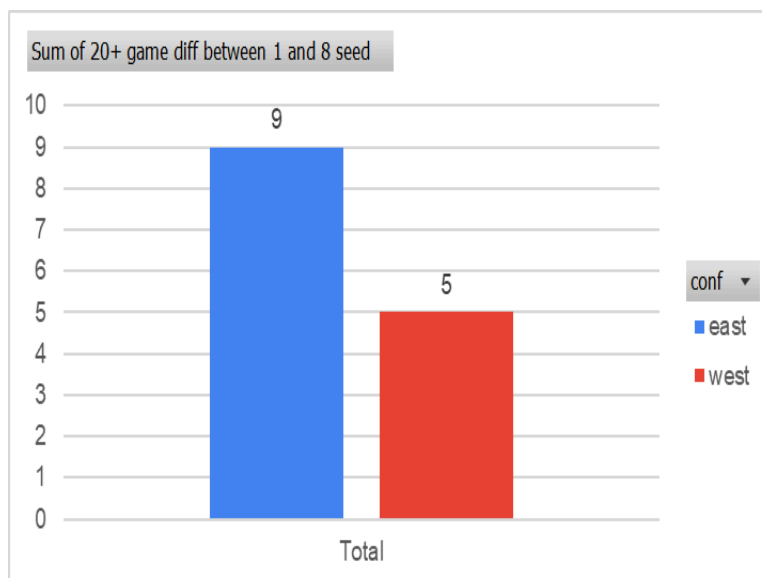
Again the west has the advantage in the MVP race. And it could have been even larger if there wasn't a player that goes by the name, LeBron James, who has 5 of the 10 MVP awards for the east. As for the west, no player has won more than 2 times other than Nikola Jokic with 3. This tells me that the west has a lot of superstars capable of bringing home an MVP trophy.



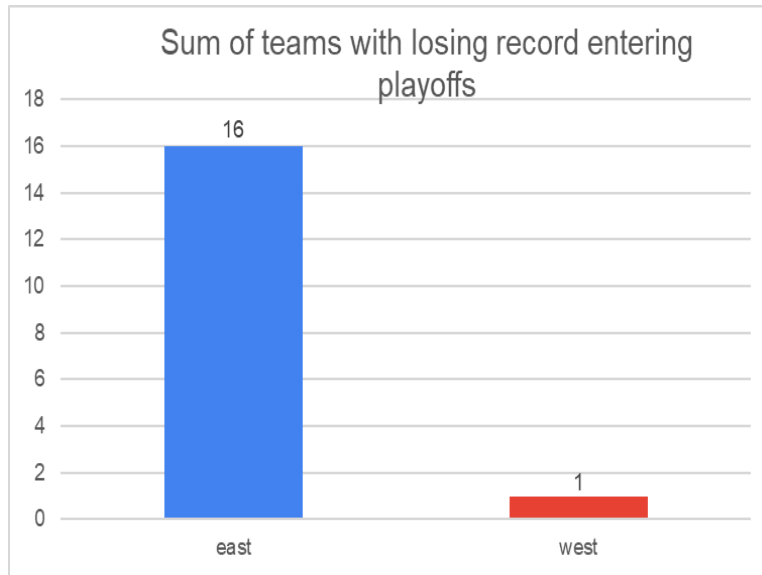
This graph above blows me away. There are 15 players who make it amongst 3 all-nba teams. The west has 1.74 times more all-nba players over the course of 25 years. I knew the west had a lot of great stars, but this really showcases the depth of the western conference. In fact, the east has never had a season where they had more all-nba players (8 or more) until this past season (24-25).



After looking at this graph, it is clear that the west has had a better regular season record amongst its top 8 seeds than the east for a very long time. However, it does appear within recent history that the east has been consistent with 3 straight seasons of over a 60% win rate. Perhaps this is a trend that will continue in the future and narrow the gap between conferences.



Above shows the difference between the 1 and 8 seed when they have a 20+ game differential between them. For example, if the 1 seed Celtics win 60 games and the 8 seed Bulls win 40 or less, then they would be counted in this graph. This showcases that the bottom half of playoff teams in the west are stronger because there is less of a gap between the playoff teams



The east has had 16 teams since 2000 to make the playoffs while having a losing record (40 or less wins). Compare this to only 1 for the west. Again, this displays how deep teams are in the west.

Results

Championships: West ✓

MVP's: West ✓

All NBA Players: West ✓

Win Percentage: West ✓

Depth: West ✓

Conclusion

The west clearly has the advantage over the east in every category, but let's dive a little deeper. When I think back to the early 2000s, I think a lot about how fun the Phoenix Suns were with head coach Mike D'Antoni. They played super fast and initiated the offense early in the shot clock. Not only was it fun to watch, but this type of style seemed to modernize the NBA into what it is today. It was the innovation of the west who brought out fast pace play. This could indicate why the west had the advantage for all these years. The East was known for its tough, physical teams who controlled the tempo by slowing things down and played closer to the basket. Fast forward to today, it appears all teams throughout the NBA are adapted to playing with pace and speed. Just look at the 2024 Indiana Pacers. I believe this play style will help narrow the win percentage gap in the future between conferences, however, the west still has more star power at this current moment.

