


Does Defense Win Championships in the NBA?

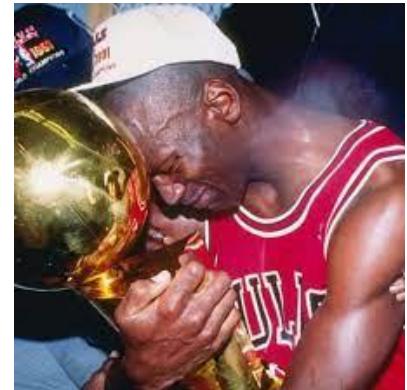
Jarrett Markman

Motivation

Motivated by a High School project, “Does ‘Defense Win Championships’ Statistically Apply to the NFL?” My whole life, I have been told (usually by coaches and the like) that “defense wins championships.” I never thought much of it, so I ended up agreeing with it and abiding by it for most of my life. Whenever I would evaluate an NBA team, I would look at their defense and if that team had a good defense I would think much higher of that team. That's possible from 30-40 years ago when teams like the "Bad Boy" Detroit Pistons were physical and defensively oriented. However, in today's NBA, with exceptional offensive yet subpar defensive players like Stephen Curry and James Harden, and super shooters, such as Kyle Korver and Joe Harris, the NBA seems to be a lot more offensively oriented, and I am uncertain if “defense wins championships” in the NBA. For my project I sought out: Does “Defense Win Championships” Statistically Apply to the NBA. I mostly used Defensive and Offensive Rating as my main metrics for better defenses and offenses, in addition to some use of turnover %, steals, TS%, EFG%, and TRB%.

Intro

“‘Defense wins championship, without a doubt,’ he proclaimed in 1997, following the statement up at the conclusion of his three-peat in 1998 with, ‘Defense wins championships; that's more evident than ever.’” - Michael Jordan



Top 5 - Defensive Ratings 1996-1998

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Miami Heat	1996-97	82	100.6
 New York Knicks	1996-97	82	101.0
 Atlanta Hawks	1996-97	82	102.3
 Chicago Bulls	1996-97	82	102.4
 Cleveland Cavaliers	1996-97	82	102.4

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Cleveland Cavaliers	1997-98	82	99.1
 San Antonio Spurs	1997-98	82	99.4
 Chicago Bulls	1997-98	82	99.8
 New York Knicks	1997-98	82	100.3
 Indiana Pacers	1997-98	82	101.5



Seasonal Results

1996-1997 Heat: L, Conference Finals

1996-1997 Knicks: L, Conference Semi-Finals

1996-1997 Hawks: L, Conference Semi-Finals

1996-1997 Bulls: W, Finals

1996-1997 Cavs: 9 seed, missed playoffs

1997-1998 Cavs: L, First Round

1997-1998 Spurs: L, Conference Semi-Finals

1997-1998 Bulls: W, Finals

1997-1998 Knicks: L, Conference Semi-Finals

1997-1998 Pacers: L, Conference Finals

Top 5 - Offensive Ratings 1996-1998

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Chicago Bulls	1996-97	82	114.4
 Utah Jazz	1996-97	82	113.6
 Seattle SuperSonics	1996-97	82	111.2
 Charlotte Hornets	1996-97	82	110.9
 Detroit Pistons	1996-97	82	110.6

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Utah Jazz	1997-98	82	112.7
 Los Angeles Lakers	1997-98	82	111.9
 Seattle SuperSonics	1997-98	82	111.6
 Indiana Pacers	1997-98	82	108.4
 New Jersey Nets	1997-98	82	108.3



Seasonal Results

1996-1997 Bulls: W, Finals

1996-1997 Jazz: L, Finals

1996-1997 SuperSonics: L, Conference Semi-Finals

1996-1997 Hornets: L, First Round

1996-1997 Pistons: L, First Round

1997-1998 Jazz: L, Finals

1997-1998 Lakers: L, Conference Finals

1997-1998 SuperSonics: L, Conference Semi-Finals

1997-1998 Pacers: L, Conference Finals

1997-1998 Nets: L, First Round

Current Era

Because I initially believe the Warriors signify a significant offensive shift I will separate the data from 2010-2014 and 2015-2021



Offense Versus Defense

2010-2014

Top 5 Defenses 2010-2014

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Chicago Bulls	2010-11	82	100.3
 Boston Celtics	2010-11	82	100.3
 Orlando Magic	2010-11	82	102.0
 Milwaukee Bucks	2010-11	82	102.5
 Miami Heat	2010-11	82	103.5

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Indiana Pacers	2012-13	81	99.8
 Memphis Grizzlies	2012-13	82	100.3
 San Antonio Spurs	2012-13	82	101.6
 Oklahoma City Thunder	2012-13	82	102.6
 Washington Wizards	2012-13	82	103.0

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Boston Celtics	2011-12	66	98.2
 Chicago Bulls	2011-12	66	98.3
 Philadelphia 76ers	2011-12	66	99.2
 Miami Heat	2011-12	66	100.2
 New York Knicks	2011-12	66	101.0

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Indiana Pacers	2013-14	82	99.3
 Chicago Bulls	2013-14	82	100.5
 San Antonio Spurs	2013-14	82	102.4
 Golden State Warriors	2013-14	82	102.6
 Charlotte Bobcats	2013-14	82	103.8



Seasonal Results

2010-2011 Bulls: L, Conference Finals

2010-2011 Celtics: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2010-2011 Magic: L, First Round

2010-2011 Bucks: 9 seed, missed playoffs

2010-2011 Heat: L, Finals

2012-2013 Pacers: L, Conference Finals

2012-2013 Grizzlies: L, Conference Finals

2012-2013 Spurs: L, Finals

2012-2013 Thunder: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2012-2013 Wizards: 11 seed, missed playoffs

2011-2012 Celtics: L, Conference Finals

2011-2012 Bulls: L, First Round

2011-2012 76ers: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2011-2012 Heat: W, Finals

2011-2012 Knicks: L, First Round

2013-2014 Pacers: L, Conference Finals

2013-2014 Bulls: L, First Round

2013-2014 Spurs: W, Finals

2013-2014 Warriors: L, First Round

2013-2014 Bobcats: L, First Round

Top 5 Offenses 2011-2014

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Denver Nuggets	2010-11	82	112.3
 San Antonio Spurs	2010-11	82	111.8
 Miami Heat	2010-11	82	111.7
 Houston Rockets	2010-11	82	111.3
 Oklahoma City Thunder	2010-11	82	111.2

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Oklahoma City Thunder	2012-13	82	112.4
 Miami Heat	2012-13	82	112.3
 New York Knicks	2012-13	82	111.1
 Los Angeles Clippers	2012-13	82	110.6
 Denver Nuggets	2012-13	82	110.4

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 San Antonio Spurs	2011-12	66	110.9
 Oklahoma City Thunder	2011-12	66	109.8
 Denver Nuggets	2011-12	66	109.2
 Los Angeles Clippers	2011-12	66	108.5
 Chicago Bulls	2011-12	66	107.4

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Los Angeles Clippers	2013-14	82	112.1
 Portland Trail Blazers	2013-14	82	111.5
 Dallas Mavericks	2013-14	82	111.2
 Houston Rockets	2013-14	82	111.0
 Miami Heat	2013-14	82	110.9



Seasonal Results

2010-2011 Nuggets: L, First Round

2010-2011 Spurs: L, First Round

2010-2011 Heat: L, First Round

2010-2011 Rockets: 9 seed, missed playoffs

2010-2011 Thunder: L, Conference Finals

2012-2013 Thunder: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2012-2013 Heat: W, Finals

2012-2013 Knicks: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2012-2013 Clippers: L, First Round

2012-2013 Nuggets: L, First Round

2011-2012 Spurs: L, Conference Finals

2011-2012 Thunder: L, Finals

2011-2012 Nuggets: L, First Round

2011-2012 Clippers: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2011-2012 Bulls: L, First Round

2013-2014 Clippers: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2013-2014 Trail Blazers: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2013-2014 Mavericks: L, First Round

2013-2014 Rockets: L, First Round

2013-2014 Heat: L, Finals



Offense Versus Defense

2015-2019, 2020-2021

Top 5 Defenses 2015-2019, 2020-2021

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Golden State Warriors	2014-15	82	101.4
 San Antonio Spurs	2014-15	82	102.0
 Memphis Grizzlies	2014-15	82	102.2
 Milwaukee Bucks	2014-15	82	102.2
 Washington Wizards	2014-15	82	103.0

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 San Antonio Spurs	2015-16	82	99.0
 Atlanta Hawks	2015-16	82	101.4
 Indiana Pacers	2015-16	82	102.9
 Boston Celtics	2015-16	82	103.6
 Golden State Warriors	2015-16	82	103.8

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 San Antonio Spurs	2016-17	82	103.5
 Golden State Warriors	2016-17	82	104.0
 Utah Jazz	2016-17	82	105.3
 Atlanta Hawks	2016-17	82	105.7
 Miami Heat	2016-17	82	106.7

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Boston Celtics	2017-18	82	103.9
 Utah Jazz	2017-18	82	103.9
 San Antonio Spurs	2017-18	82	104.8
 Philadelphia 76ers	2017-18	82	105.0
 Toronto Raptors	2017-18	82	105.9

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Milwaukee Bucks	2018-19	82	105.2
 Utah Jazz	2018-19	82	105.7
 Indiana Pacers	2018-19	82	106.5
 Oklahoma City Thunder	2018-19	82	107.0
 Toronto Raptors	2018-19	82	107.1

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Los Angeles Lakers	2020-21	72	107.1
 Philadelphia 76ers	2020-21	72	107.6
 New York Knicks	2020-21	72	108.2
 Utah Jazz	2020-21	72	108.3
 Golden State Warriors	2020-21	72	110.1



Seasonal Results

2014-2015 Warriors: W, Finals

2014-2015 Spurs: L, First Round

2014-2015 Grizzlies: L, Conference Semis

2014-2015 Bucks: L, First Round

2014-2015 Wizards: L, Conference Semis

2015-2016 Spurs: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2015-2016 Hawks: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2015-2016 Pacers: L, First Round

2015-2016 Celtics: L, First Round

2015-2016 Warriors: L, Finals

2016-2017 Spurs: L, Conference Finals

2016-2017 Warriors: W, Finals

2016-2017 Jazz: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2016-2017 Hawks: L, First Round

2016-2017 Heat: 9 seed, missed playoffs

2017-2018 Celtics: L, Conference Finals

2017-2018 Jazz: L, Conference Semis

2017-2018 Spurs: L, First Round

2017-2018 Bulls: 13 seed, missed playoffs

2017-2018 Raptors: L, Conference Semis

2018-2019 Bucks: L, Conference Finals

2018-2019 Jazz: L, First Round

2018-2019 Pacers: L, First Round

2018-2019 Thunder: L, First Round

2018-2019 Raptors: W, Finals

2020-2021 Lakers: L, First Round

2020-2021 76ers: L, Conference Semis

2020-2021 Knicks: L, First Round

2020-2021 Jazz: L, Conference Semi-Finals

2020-2021 Warriors: 8 seed, L, Play-in, missed playoffs

Top 5 Offenses 2015-2019, 2020-2021

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Los Angeles Clippers	2014-15	82	112.4
 Golden State Warriors	2014-15	82	111.6
 Cleveland Cavaliers	2014-15	82	111.1
 Toronto Raptors	2014-15	82	111.0
 Dallas Mavericks	2014-15	82	109.5

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Golden State Warriors	2015-16	82	114.5
 Oklahoma City Thunder	2015-16	82	113.1
 Cleveland Cavaliers	2015-16	82	110.9
 San Antonio Spurs	2015-16	82	110.3
 Toronto Raptors	2015-16	82	110.0

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Golden State Warriors	2016-17	82	115.6
 Houston Rockets	2016-17	82	114.7
 Cleveland Cavaliers	2016-17	82	113.6
 Denver Nuggets	2016-17	82	113.2
 L.A. Clippers	2016-17	82	112.7

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Houston Rockets	2017-18	82	114.7
 Toronto Raptors	2017-18	82	113.8
 Golden State Warriors	2017-18	82	113.6
 Minnesota Timberwolves	2017-18	82	113.4
 Cleveland Cavaliers	2017-18	82	112.9

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Golden State Warriors	2018-19	82	115.9
 Houston Rockets	2018-19	82	115.5
 Portland Trail Blazers	2018-19	82	114.7
 Milwaukee Bucks	2018-19	82	113.8
 Toronto Raptors	2018-19	82	113.1

TEAM	SEASON	GP	ORTG
 Brooklyn Nets	2020-21	72	118.3
 Portland Trail Blazers	2020-21	72	117.8
 Utah Jazz	2020-21	72	117.6
 L.A. Clippers	2020-21	72	117.6
 Phoenix Suns	2020-21	72	117.2



Seasonal Results

2014-2015 Clippers: L, Conference Semis

2014-2015 Warriors: W, Finals

2014-2015 Cavs: L, Finals

2014-2015 Raptors: L, First Round

2014-2015 Mavericks: L, First Round

2015-2016 Warriors: L, Finals

2015-2016 Thunder: L, Conference Finals

2015-2016 Cavs: W, Finals

2015-2016 Spurs: L, Conference Semis

2015-2016 Raptors: L, Conference Finals

2016-2017 Warriors: W, Finals

2016-2017 Rockets: L, Conference Semis

2016-2017 Cavs: L, Finals

2016-2017 Nuggets: 9 seed, missed playoffs

2016-2017 Clippers: L, First Round

2017-2018 Rockets: L, Conference Finals

2017-2018 Raptors: L, Conference Semis

2017-2018 Warriors: W, Finals

2017-2018 Timberwolves: L, First Round

2017-2018 Cavs: L, Finals

2018-2019 Warriors: L, Finals

2018-2019 Rockets: L, Conference Semis

2018-2019 Trail Blazers: L, Conference Finals

2018-2019 Bucks: L, Conference Finals

2018-2019 Raptors: W, Finals

2020-2021 Nets: L, Conference Semis

2020-2021 Trail Blazers: L, Conference Semis

2020-2021 Jazz: L, Conference Semis

2020-2021 Clippers: L, Conference Finals

2020-2021 Suns: L, Finals

Defense	W, Finals	Missed Playoffs	L, Finals	Offense	W, Finals	Missed Playoffs	L, Finals
1996-1998 Defense versus Offense (regular season)	2	1	0		1	0	2
2010-2014 Defense versus Offense (regular season)	2	2	2		1	1	2
2014-2019, 2020-2021 Defense versus Offense (regular season)	3	3	1		4	1	6
Sum of total years	7	6	3		6	2	10

Playoff success is linked more towards offense in comparison to defense. Ten teams in the top five for offensive rating in these 12 seasons lost in the finals. Additionally more teams in the top five for defense missed the playoffs completely than the top five offensive teams. Something of note is that more teams in the top five for defensive rating actually won the NBA Finals than the top five teams in offensive rating. Overall, it seems that better offensive teams in the NBA find more success overall, however, it's not fair to say that defense doesn't win championships because defense is more connected to NBA Finals success. Additionally, a lot of these teams overlap, such as the 2018-2019 Toronto Raptors, who were fifth in both offensive and defensive rating and won the NBA Finals. Based on this data however, it seems to be present that better offensive performance is more linked to success in the NBA than defensive performance.

PSA

Defensive and Offensive rating are both different metrics that I used for this data analysis but it doesn't incorporate other data that factors into offensive and defensive performance because there are other things like TS%, EFG%, TRB% and TO% that could possibly play larger roles and could be more correlated to success in the NBA. It's impossible to say definitively that offense is more correlated with success, but based on my data collected, it's fair to make a hypothesis that in the regular season, better offensive rating is more connected to success in the NBA.

Maybe Defensive Rating is Circumstantial

Compare defensive ratings in the playoffs versus the regular season, because maybe “defense wins championships” is circumstantial to the playoffs rather than to the season as a whole.

Let's look at the Bulls championship runs in 1996-1997 and 1997-1998.

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Miami Heat	1996-97	17	99.4
 Chicago Bulls	1996-97	19	101.7
 New York Knicks	1996-97	10	101.8
 Detroit Pistons	1996-97	5	106.3
 Utah Jazz	1996-97	20	106.7

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRTG
 Utah Jazz	1997-98	20	100.4
 San Antonio Spurs	1997-98	9	101.4
 Chicago Bulls	1997-98	21	101.4
 Atlanta Hawks	1997-98	4	102.9
 Houston Rockets	1997-98	5	103.2

1997-1998 NBA Finals - Bulls Vs. Jazz

This piqued my interest because the Jazz were the best defensive team over the postseason per defensive rating. If defense wins championships given defensive rating was circumstantial the Jazz would be the NBA Finals winners. Obviously “defense wins championships” shouldn’t be limited to one statistic.

In the 1997-1998 NBA Finals the Bulls:

- Held the Jazz to 80.2 points/game, 7.8 less than their own average of 88 points/game.
- Had 60 steals compared to the Jazz’s 38 steals.
- Had a turnover percentage of 12.2% compared to the Jazz’s 16.9%.

1997-1998 NBA Finals - Bulls Vs. Jazz

Let's look at some other metrics:

- TS%
 - Bulls: 51%
 - Jazz: 50.1%
- EFG%
 - Bulls: 45.9%
 - Jazz: 45.8%
- TRB%
 - Bulls: 49.8%
 - Jazz: 50.2%

Analysis

Despite the Jazz playing better defense overall the whole postseason, they were majorly outperformed by the Bulls in that finals. In addition to points per game, they were also much better at getting steals, forcing turnovers, and preventing their own turnovers. If you look at some of the four factors, such as TS%, EFG% and TRB%, the Bulls only slightly outperformed the Jazz in these three variables, actually being outperformed in TRB%. It seems prevalent that the Bulls had a lot of success in this NBA Finals due to their defensive performance. Obviously they didn't win because they had a good defense, but their defense played extremely well and played a large role in them winning their championship. On an outer lens, the Jazz may have better defensive numbers over the course of the 1997-1998 playoffs, but the Bulls outperformed them by a large margin in the 1997-1998 NBA Finals. For the most part, the team that wins the series will have better numbers because they won more games and most likely scored more and allowed less points. Look at "defense wins championships" series by series is extremely flawed because it's self explanatory. In order to determine the best defensive teams you need a larger sample size and if you look at 4-7 games obviously the winner will seem to be better defensively.

Playoff Defensive Rating Current Era

Compare defensive ratings in the playoffs versus the regular season in the current era, because maybe “defense wins championships” is circumstantial to the playoffs rather than to the season as a whole.

- Look at playoffs series in the past 10 years.
- Maybe defensive performance in the playoffs is important rather than the season overall.
- Look for playoff defense anomalies.

Playoff Defensive Rating Current Era

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Orlando Magic	2010-11	6	100.3
Chicago Bulls	2010-11	16	100.9
Miami Heat	2010-11	21	103.4
Boston Celtics	2010-11	9	103.6
Atlanta Hawks	2010-11	12	105.5
San Antonio Spurs	2010-11	6	105.6
Memphis Grizzlies	2010-11	13	106.1
Dallas Mavericks	2010-11	21	106.3

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Washington Wizards	2013-14	11	100.9
Atlanta Hawks	2013-14	7	103.0
San Antonio Spurs	2013-14	23	104.2
Indiana Pacers	2013-14	19	104.8
Chicago Bulls	2013-14	5	108.3
Memphis Grizzlies	2013-14	7	108.5
Oklahoma City Thunder	2013-14	19	109.2
Toronto Raptors	2013-14	7	110.0
Miami Heat	2013-14	20	110.8

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Golden State Warriors	2017-18	21	103.6
Indiana Pacers	2017-18	7	104.6
Philadelphia 76ers	2017-18	10	106.5
Utah Jazz	2017-18	11	106.9
Boston Celtics	2017-18	19	107.0
Houston Rockets	2017-18	17	107.7
New Orleans Pelicans	2017-18	9	107.8
Oklahoma City Thunder	2017-18	6	107.9
Milwaukee Bucks	2017-18	7	109.4
Cleveland Cavaliers	2017-18	22	111.2

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Atlanta Hawks	2011-12	6	97.1
Chicago Bulls	2011-12	6	97.6
Philadelphia 76ers	2011-12	13	98.3
Boston Celtics	2011-12	20	99.2
Indiana Pacers	2011-12	11	100.9
Miami Heat	2011-12	23	101.6
Memphis Grizzlies	2011-12	7	102.0
San Antonio Spurs	2011-12	14	103.9
Los Angeles Clippers	2011-12	11	106.5
Denver Nuggets	2011-12	7	106.6
Orlando Magic	2011-12	5	107.0
Oklahoma City Thunder	2011-12	20	107.4

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Golden State Warriors	2014-15	21	100.5
Chicago Bulls	2014-15	12	100.7
Washington Wizards	2014-15	10	101.7
Cleveland Cavaliers	2014-15	20	103.1

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Boston Celtics	2015-16	6	100.5
San Antonio Spurs	2015-16	10	101.1
Miami Heat	2015-16	14	101.7
L.A. Clippers	2015-16	6	103.9
Indiana Pacers	2015-16	7	103.9
Atlanta Hawks	2015-16	10	104.5
Cleveland Cavaliers	2015-16	21	106.0
Golden State Warriors	2015-16	24	106.1

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Milwaukee Bucks	2018-19	15	102.5
Boston Celtics	2018-19	9	103.6
Indiana Pacers	2018-19	4	104.2
Toronto Raptors	2018-19	24	104.4
Philadelphia 76ers	2018-19	12	106.7
Houston Rockets	2018-19	11	107.6
Utah Jazz	2018-19	5	108.5
Oklahoma City Thunder	2018-19	5	111.2
Orlando Magic	2018-19	5	111.2
Golden State Warriors	2018-19	22	111.9

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
New York Knicks	2012-13	12	98.3
Boston Celtics	2012-13	6	98.9
San Antonio Spurs	2012-13	21	101.1
Miami Heat	2012-13	23	102.9

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Milwaukee Bucks	2016-17	6	103.7
Golden State Warriors	2016-17	17	105.5
Atlanta Hawks	2016-17	6	108.5
Houston Rockets	2016-17	11	109.5
Toronto Raptors	2016-17	10	109.9
L.A. Clippers	2016-17	7	110.1
Washington Wizards	2016-17	13	110.9
Utah Jazz	2016-17	11	111.3
Cleveland Cavaliers	2016-17	18	112.1

TEAM	SEASON	GP	DRtg
Milwaukee Bucks	2020-21	23	107.6
Philadelphia 76ers	2020-21	12	108.5
Brooklyn Nets	2020-21	12	109.6
Phoenix Suns	2020-21	22	110.0



Years when the winner was outperformed defensively in the playoffs

- 2010-2011, 2012-2013

Years when the winner largely outperformed the loser defensively in the playoffs

- 2011-2012, 2013-2014, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019

Years of close proximity

- 2012-2013, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2020-2021



Two outliers

In the 2010-2011 NBA Finals the Mavericks:

- Gave up 92.3 points/game, and scored 94.7 points/game.
- Had 43 steals in comparison to the Heat's 48.
- Had a turnover rate of 13.5% in comparison to the Heat's 13%.

In the 2012-2013 NBA Finals the Heat:

- Gave up 97.7 points/game, and scored 97 points/game.
- Had 61 steals in comparison to the Spurs' 49.
- Had a turnover rate of 11.8% in comparison to the Spurs' 13.2%.



Analysis of Warriors rise to success

Based on the data collected for the Golden State Warriors in their finals appearances (2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19) something that is EXTREMELY prominent is their defensive rating in their finals wins versus their finals losses. (BASED ON DEFENSIVE RATING IN THE PLAYOFFS)

- They had the best defensive rating in their finals wins in 2014-15 and 2017-18.
 - They had the second best defensive rating in their finals win in 2016-2017.
- In their other finals appearances (2015-2016 and 2018-2019):
 - They had the 8th and 10th best defenses in terms of defensive rating.
- Somehow, the Warriors won the NBA Finals when their defenses performed better.
 - This is a pretty good way to indicate that defense wins championships is fair to say because the Warriors performing better defensively is linked to them winning the finals versus losing the finals.

Analysis

In eight out of the last ten finals in the NBA (excluding the covid season) the winner has performed better defensively than their opponent in terms of defensive rating. While defensive rating is nowhere near a good measure of defensive talent it still highlights the correlation between better defensive success and winning. Additionally, while in the 2012-2013 NBA finals the Spurs may have had a better defensive rating over the playoffs, in that specific NBA Finals, while the Heat gave up .7 more points per game and still won, they performed better in other defensive metrics such as steals and turnover %. Highlighting the fact that defensive rating might not be the best indication of defensive success. Looking specifically at different playoff series' is flawed because a majority of the time, unless the series is extremely close, the winning team will obviously have scored more points in total and allowed less points in total. However, in a larger sample size of the overall postseason it seems that playoff defensive rating is correlated with winning championships in the NBA.

Conclusion

The phrase “defense wins championships” is extremely hard to evaluate. There are different facets to what makes a defense, such as points allowed, takeaways, blocks, offensive turnovers, defensive rating and situational defense. To say that the phrase “defense wins championships” meant that only defense won championships is false. Obviously there isn’t one singular variable that contributes to team success. Based on the research, it seems that regular season Offensive Rating is more correlated to overall team success in the NBA. However, when looking at defensive rating in the playoffs, it is clear that the better defensive team finds more success in winning the NBA Finals. If you specifically look at a team like the Golden State Warriors and their success, such as their 3 championships out of 5 years. In their 3 championship wins, throughout the playoffs, they had defensive ratings of 1, 1 and 2, in comparison to ratings of 8 and 10 in their 3 losses. While their defense was objectively worse throughout the regular season, in their championship wins, they turned it up a notch and their defense was the best if not the second best in the whole pool of playoff teams. This correlation to rise in success and rise in defensive success highlights the importance of defensive rating in the postseason. Not to mention other teams with some of the best defensive ratings in the postseason finding similar success as the Warriors. Such as the 3 Warriors wins, in addition to the 2012-2013 Miami Heat, 2013-2014 San Antonio Spurs and the 2020-2021 Milwaukee Bucks. Given this data, it is present that in the postseason that Defensive Rating is correlated with championship success in the NBA.

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