# A Quick NBA Finals Review

## Finals MVP: Giannis Antetokounmpo

This was Giannis’ finals. It was plain to see that he was the best player in this series and one of the best in the league at the moment. If you watched any of the 6 games, you could see his dominance and his determination shining through in the biggest moments. Especially in game 6, as Brad Botkin of CBS Sports remarks, he was a man on a mission. He overcame injury and widespread criticism from those who claimed he did not have skill and those who berated him for his free throw shooting. (Admittedly, he really needs to work on his free throws, but other than this weakness he was impossible to stop throughout the playoffs).

Antetokounmpo is now the only player besides Shaq to tally 3 games with 40+ points and 10+ rebounds in the NBA finals. In his incredible game 6 performance, he became the first player since Bob Pettit in 1958 to score 50 points in a championship closeout game. His stat line in game 6 was preposterous: 50 points, 14 rebounds, and 5 blocks on 16/25 from the field and an astonishing 17/19 from the line.

Here’s a quick stat for everyone to put into perspective just how astonishing Giannis’ performance from the line was in game 6. Using a binomial distribution for free throws and Giannis’ regular season free throw percentage of 71.7% (which is actually better than his playoff average), Giannis is only expected to make 17 or more free throws (out of 19) 6.3% of the time. That’s insane. It really was his night. It was one of the greatest single game finals performances in the history of the league and I loved every second of it.

## Player Highlights and Team Comparison

I could sing Giannis’ praises for hours because I love his story, personality, and grit, but this is supposed to be a finals review, not a Giannis review. The Bucks as a whole showed impressive determination to come back from 2-0 down to start the series. Middleton stepped up in big moments. Jrue Holiday, though he struggled immensely on offense at times during this series, was strong defensively per usual averaging 2.2 steals per game. Finally, secondary players like Bobby Portis and Brook Lopez played their roles perfectly.

The Suns played well too and showed that they will be a formidable force in the years to come. Devin Booker is a star, averaging 28 points throughout this series, and will continue to show his offensive prowess in the future. Ayton did not excel, but in my opinion is a solid traditional big that Phoenix can lean on. Mikal Bridges is a fantastic defender (no bias of course) and great all-around player who should be a wonderful option at 3 for the Suns. Cam Johnson also provides a great spark offensively with his shooting ability. Chris Paul played well on average, with 22 pts and 8 assists per game. However, he and Booker failed to lead their team to a victory. A few costly turnovers and an inability to stop Giannis on the defensive end spelled the end of the road for the Suns.

More important than individual metrics is how each team performed as a whole. You could make a case that the Bucks won because they bested the Suns in 3 of Dean Oliver’s “Four Factors of Basketball Success.” If you are unfamiliar with Dean Oliver, he is a pioneer of advanced basketball analytics and wrote the book “Basketball on Paper,” which I highly recommend. He believes that the most important factors in basketball are shooting, turnovers, rebounding, and free throws, in that order. The Bucks had a better turnover percentage, offensive rebound percentage, and draw foul rate than the Suns, while the Suns only had a better effective shooting percentage\*. Though shooting is the most important category, according to Oliver, it was not enough to overcome the Bucks dominance on the offensive boards. The Bucks offensive rebounding percentage was 29.2%, compared to the Suns’ 17.4%. For reference, the league average is around 27%, so the Suns grossly underperformed in this category. The more offensive rebounds you get, the more chances you can create, so this massive discrepancy likely played a key role in deciding the NBA champions.

Overall, the Bucks deserved it and I’m happy for Middleton and Giannis who stayed together in Milwaukee for 8 years to bring home a trophy.

## What If?

More than any other postseason, this year’s playoffs left us wondering what could have been. What if the (insert any team here) were healthy? Injuries plagued the league, with many speculating that the short offseason was to blame. The Nets looked like shoe-ins for the finals if all 3 stars stayed safe. The Clippers showed flashes of greatness, even without Kawhi, so we were left wondering how they would have fared with him. The list goes on, but almost no team was at full strength. I don’t like that all these injuries occurred, obviously, or that they will undoubtedly be used to discredit the champion or the runner up. The Suns and Bucks fought their way to the finals fairly and should be celebrated for their achievements.

With that being said, I couldn’t help but raise my own “what if” questions. Primarily, what if Dario Saric did not get injured? Saric was an overlooked, but key player in the Suns’ rotation this year, providing solid minutes and efficiency as a 6th man. I hypothesized that his presence would have made a difference. To test this, I compared the offensive and defensive ratings for all lineups with and without Saric throughout the Suns’ season. The lineups that Saric was in had slightly higher offensive ratings (112.45) on average than lineups without him (111.78). They also had a better defensive rating (106.08 compared to 107.72) and, thus, a better net rating by 2.3 points.

Saric was not the only injured player in this series, however. Villanova’s very own Donte DiVincenzo was sidelined for the Bucks, so I decided to look into his impact in the same way. Lineups with DiVincenzo are 2 points worse per 100 possessions on defense, but are about 7 points better on offense, leading to a positive net rating difference of around 5 for DiVincenzo’s lineups.

Does this definitively say that the Suns would have been better off with Saric in the lineup or that the Bucks would have won faster if they had Donte? Does it prove that DiVincenzo’s impact is more positive than Saric’s because his lineups have a higher net rating when compared to lineups where he is absent? Not necessarily. A lineup’s rating has a lot to do with the competition it is challenging. If the opposing lineup has a great defense, the Suns’ lineup will have a harder time scoring and will have a lower offensive rating. The same works for defense and for situations when the opposing lineup performs poorly. It is possible that DiVincenzo and Saric were more often playing weaker competition, so their ratings were buffed when compared to their teams’ starting lineups, who typically play other starters. Until I find a way to adjust for this difference (which I don’t think is possible with the data I have), this method is not foolproof. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see how teams’ ratings change with the absence or presence of one player. This method will be more informative when I adjust for the level of competition.

For now, I will stick with the certainties: The Bucks are NBA champions, the Suns are the runners-up, and they both earned their spots.

# \*Definitions

**Offensive Rating (ORtg):** points produced/scored per 100 possessions

**Defensive Rating (DRtg):** points allowed per 100 possessions

**Effective Field Goal Percentage (eFG%):** FG% adjusted for the fact that a 3-pointer is worth 1.5 times a 2 pointer

(FG + 0.5 \* 3P) / FGA

**Draw Foul Rate:** A measure of how often a player/team gets to the line and how often they convert

FT / FGA

**Offensive Rebound Percentage (ORB%)**: Estimate of the percentage of available offensive rebounds a player/team gets while on the floor

ORB / (ORB + Opp DRB)

**Turnover Percentage (TOV%)**: Estimate of turnovers per 100 plays

100\*TOV / (FGA + 0.44\*FTA + TOV)