

How (and why) Position-less Lineups have taken over the NBA Playoffs (2023)



Andre Iguodala's spot duties at point guard helped spark the Golden State Warriors in their first-round series win over the San Antonio Spurs.

Positionless Basketball

The revolution is being televised. The bedrock of NBA strategy, and basketball in general, has long been its positions on the court. Those positions – point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward and center – have traditionally been prescribed according to height, with shorter guards and taller centers.

In a round peg, round hole game, everyone has a role, tall players were guided to go stand under the basket while shorter guards told to dribble and pass the ball.

But athleticism, mixed with a little math, has revolutionized the NBA. “Defensive rule changes – primarily those that decreased physicality – and analytics have allowed for increases in the speed of the game,” says Bill Burgos, former head strength and conditioning coach for the Orlando Magic. A cheat code for NBA basketball, those analytics revealed the importance of three-pointers and pick-and-roll matchups, allowing a more offensive game to flourish.

This need to be able to dribble, shoot and defend in the open court has spawned an NBA hybrid player, one that frequently fits squarely in the mid-range of the NBA height spectrum. “Basketball is becoming more position-less and more about team basketball,” says Drew Hanlen, NBA skills coach and consultant, “Called isolations are less

used and ball movement is valued.”

The Swiss Army knife-like versatility of the NBA was exemplified in the first-round of the NBA playoffs. Notably a San Antonio-Golden State matchup during which Warriors coach Steve Kerr started forward Andre Iguodala at point guard, a move that ignited a sluggish Warriors team. The first round of the playoffs also featured the Philadelphia 76ers 6ft 10in rookie point guard Ben Simmons and Milwaukee Bucks position busting unicorn, 6ft 10in Giannis Antetokounmpo, with both players tasked as playmakers.

While the NBA has seen its share of tall guards over the years – Magic Johnson and Anfernee ‘Penny’ Hardaway to name two of the best – the league has increasingly hybridized its lineups, trying to force mismatches. The true center, the big man who never strayed far from the basket – is a thing of the past. Today’s centers are either yesterday’s forwards or seven-footers that can shoot and run the floor.

Players floating from guard to forward and even sometimes to center, and back, all within the same game. “Players that can guard multiple positions on defense and stretch the floor and play within a free-flowing system on offense are highly valuable in today’s game,” says Hanlen.

The reason for the change, other than the harnessing of a global talent base, has a lot to do with defense. The pick and roll – during which one player, usually a taller player, sets a screen on the ball handler’s defender and the spins to the basket – was once an offensive strategy used by only a few teams. Now most, if not all, teams can run the pick and roll with all five players on the court, and any one of the five can set or use the screen. To effectively defend the pick and roll, players need to be able to both defend quick shifty guards and tall springy big men.

But the position-less revolution hasn’t resulted in the NBA getting taller or shorter. In fact, the average height in the NBA, 6ft 7in, hasn’t budged in nearly 40 years. It’s more that classifications have become blurred, with positions much less defined as they once were.

“Because of the style of play common in today’s NBA – one that puts a premium on speed, spacing the floor and the ability to guard the pick and roll – many NBA players have common characteristics – 6ft 7in to 6ft 9in with a long wingspan,” says Burgos. Now tall point guards aren’t really the exception, rather the rule, as three players in the top-10 of assists per game were 6ft 7in or taller.

“It’s not how big you are, it’s how big you play,” said John Wooden, coach of 10 NCAA championship teams at UCLA. According to David Epstein’s *The Sports Gene* the average ratio of arms to height in the NBA is 1.06, compared to the average man, which has a wingspan equal to his height. That added reach allows players to play ‘bigger’, enabling them to block shots and rebound like a taller player but move like a shorter one.

A recent analysis of the NBA combined found, not surprisingly, that height, standing reach, and wingspan, in addition to other physical qualities, was predictive of NBA performance.

Hanlen agrees, emphasizing that the best players in the league often fit that body type. “NBA teams love length and versatility. Also, if you look at the NBA All-Star teams, along with the Rookie teams, you see a lot of guys in that category.”

But it isn't just the hybrid guard-forwards that are changing their game, centers are straying into areas of the court once only reserved for six-footers, contributing in ways not seen in past eras of basketball.

According to basketball-reference.com, in the 1999-00 season, players 7ft or taller combined for just 133 total three-point attempts (Dirk Nowitzki had 116 of those attempts). This season, 15 seven-footers attempted over 100 three-pointers with Lauri Markkanen of the Bulls tossing up over 400 threes (making 145), perhaps perfectly illustrating today's new age 'center'.

Of course, this has all trickled down to the high school and college level, changing the way young players play and prepare for the NBA. “The new NBA values the three-point line so heavily that we spend more time shooting threes than ever before,” says Hanlen. In recent drafts, Burgos sees players drafted into more hybrid roles, able to slide into multiple positions, not just the one they played in college.

But when every team starts following the same formula, the next great team might just be the one that goes back to the old formula, a classic half-court offense with a dominant big man.

Changing a lifetime of hoops tradition is hard, but a young generation of stars is up to the task. The result is a fast, team-oriented brand of basketball that has the NBA hitting sky-high popularity ratings.