

# Denver Nuggets should compete next year; otherwise 'summer of 2025 will be difficult'

By TONY JONES

**Denver** — Jamal Murray sat beside the scorer's table, staring into space, knowing that he and the Denver Nuggets were on the verge of seeing their season end. He tried to control his breathing, but the heavy minutes, and the fatigue that he finally caught up to him in a deciding game. He inhaled deeply and walked on the court, his head down and his hands on his hips. With two minutes remaining in Game 7, reality set in.

Now all that's left are questions: Why did the defending NBA champions come up short? And where do these Nuggets go from here?

A team that won 57 regular-season games, a team with Nikola Jokic, the best player in basketball, and a team that entered the post-season with a real chance to repeat didn't make it to the conference finals. As head coach Michael Malone said, the Nuggets will be back as a favorite next season. But today's NBA is one where you have to strike while the proverbial iron is hot. Opportunities missed are opportunities that don't easily present themselves again.

The Nuggets will be back next season. They're too talented. Their starting core is still at the top of the league, and next year they go back to being a team searching for the championship trophy instead of defending it. But that doesn't mean this team was left to have to reflect on where it failed, make changes around the corner and wade through the significant challenge of impending salary cap difficulties. But this is a franchise that has tasted the ultimate success, and remains confident in its contending window.

"I think we have the pieces needed that we can win it again next year," Denver general manager Calvin Booth told The Athletic. "If we don't give ourselves the opportunity to win the summer of 2025 will be difficult. This summer is going to be tough, but I feel like we will have a chance to be in a similar position next year."

NBA title windows used to be short. Now, in today's game, under today's salary cap rules, they are more fleeting than ever. It's why Denver deserves significant credit last year for taking advantage of its chance and winning it all.

It's also why the Denver locker room on Sunday night was like a morgue. It's why during interviews, Murray spoke in a low and barely audible voice. It's why Malone's frustration boiled over when he met with the media. And it's why the Minnesota Timberwolves are the talk of the NBA. They toppled Jokic. They found a way to outlast the Jokic. And they found a way to wear the Nuggets down in a manner that no team had done in the last two years.

"Conjuring up the energy to fight when you're being hunted is so hard," Murray said. "When you're the hunter, there is so much more motivation. You're playing with a constant chip on your shoulder. ... I think we should have won. We had so many great opportunities. It's tough, knowing that we didn't get it done."

As good as the Nuggets are and have been, they found out in real time how difficult and exhausting it was to defend a crown. In Game 7, their biggest issues weren't difficult to diagnose. They hit a wall against a younger, more athletic and fresher team that had the same hunger to beat Denver that the Nuggets had in winning a title last season.

The Nuggets also fell to a deeper team. By Game 7 it was clear: Malone trusted just six players, with the sixth being second-year forward Christian Braun, Veterans Reggie Jackson and Justin Holiday, the latter of whom actually played really well earlier in the series, were in the rotation to steal a few minutes here and there.

But Braun, because of his size, length, defense and versatility, was the only person by Game 7 whom Malone truly trusted off the bench. It speaks to the depth of the starting



Bruce Brown played an important role in the Denver Nuggets' run to the NBA championship last season before leaving for a free-agent deal with the Indiana Pacers.

five and the greatness of Jokic and Murray that the Nuggets almost pulled off a win of the series. But trying to capture a playoff series with a lack of depth against the Timberwolves' depth and athleticism is not going to go well. As it turned out, it ended poorly for the Nuggets.

Last season, Malone had eight players, including Bruce Brown and Jeff Green, he trusted and who could all play at a high level. The Nuggets, however, did not have Bird rights on Brown, who had signed a two-year, \$13.2 million deal in July 2022. Here's what we wrote about Brown last June:

*Brown's situation is unique. According to league sources, there is mutual interest in him returning to Denver, but the most the Nuggets can offer him is \$2.8 million because they don't hold Brown's Bird rights. Brown was terrific last season and even better in the playoffs. What he provided — stellar defense, shooting from the perimeter, rim pressure off the dribble and effective secondary ballhandling — wouldn't easily be replicated in Denver's rotation should Brown leave in free agency.*

Once Brown declined his second-year option, the Nuggets were destined to lose him in free agency. And lose him they did to the Indiana Pacers. Green, meanwhile, moved on to the Houston Rockets.

By the end of the Min. season series, it was obvious that not having Brown was a massive blow from which the Nuggets couldn't recover. They couldn't replicate his second-year playmaking to supplement Jokic and Murray. They couldn't replicate his offensive and defensive versatility. Perhaps most importantly, they couldn't replicate his swag.

Brown was the one who got into opponent's face and talked trash. He was the one the Nuggets no one wanted to mess with. On Sunday night, Minnesota's Anthony Edwards talked trash all night. No one in a blue uniform stepped up to match his energy.

It's what makes a championship team a championship team. It's the totality. Denver was a complete team when it won the title, and the Nuggets were the best team in the league. Denver lost a piece of that aura when it gave up Brown and Green, and that made it just vulnerable enough that it was capable of being beaten. The Timberwolves were the team that stepped up and took advantage of that vulnerability.

The Nuggets believe they have a chance to be a dynasty, but a San Antonio Spurs-kind of dynasty. The Spurs model, led by Tim Duncan, won five championships but they never won two titles consecutively. Jokic is 29 and in the prime of his career. Murray is 27 and also entering his prime. They, along with Malone, are foundational reasons the Nuggets figure to be a part of the mix for the foreseeable future.

But the results will sting for a Denver team that went through its share of adversity in its title defense.

"This year was a little different for us," Malone said. "Last year, we had the No. 1 seed (in the Western Conference) wrapped up early enough that we were able to rest people down the stretch. This year, we were fighting for positioning all season, so we weren't able to rest. This is tough on all of us. It's disappointing."

"But failure is not fatal. We are going to be back next year."

Denver's immediate future is a classic good news, bad news scenario.

Jokic, Murray and Malone are the good news. Those three put the Nuggets on a floor that's as high as any other team's over the next three years. Jokic won his third NBA MVP award this season. Murray remains one of the best perimeter scorers in the league. As long as those two are healthy and Malone is coaching, you can expect a baseline of 50-win seasons and high playoff seeds.

The "bad news" is reaching the ceiling that the Nuggets aspired to last year. It will be difficult, and it's where Booth and the front office will need to be creative. NBA of fense is rooted in having guys who can create an advantage in the half court at the post-season level. The more you have the better. Last year, the Nuggets had four such guys: Jokic, Murray, Brown and Green. This year, the Nuggets had two who could do it on every possession, and Aaron Gordon who could do it sporadically and against certain matchups. Ultimately, the collective lack of being able to create off script became one of the reasons that the team ran out of gas.

"It feels like we started to play a little late in the series," Braun said. "I thought we kind of arrived a little late. You can blame whatever you want to blame. Guys are tired from last year, whatever it is. But I felt we're the

best team in the NBA."

Denver needs a playmaker off the bench. The Nuggets could use a functional backup big man who can give Jokic real minutes of rest, but that's been a need for years. And they need a guy who can ease the burden on Jokic and Murray in select moments. Jokic had one of the highest individual usage ratings in the league. He's going to be 30 by the middle of next season, so it's time to at least try to ease his workload in the regular season.

How do the Nuggets do that? They have \$190 million already committed to the roster next season, which would put them above the NBA's second tax apron, which would restrict what they can do this summer. As our cap guru John Hollinger says, if starting shooting guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope picks up his player option, and Jackson picks up his \$5.2 million player option, and they pick up the franchise on Vlatko Cancar for \$2.3 million and use their first-round pick (\$2.8 million), the Nuggets are at \$192.4 million, plus there's \$2 million in Aaron Gordon incentives that count against the second apron. They would be over the second apron and would only be able to sign minimum contracts to fill out the roster.

If Caldwell-Pope declines his option, the Nuggets could re-sign him with Bird rights for any amount, but he'd again likely put him into the second apron at almost any reasonable price. If he walks, the Nuggets could use their taxpayer midlevel exception to sign another player and stay below the second apron, and could aggregate players in trades and take 110% back (e.g., trade Zeke Nnaji, Jalen Pickett and the 28th pick for a rotation player) as long as they stayed below the second apron. Gordon's unlikely \$2 million in incentives count toward this, so minus Caldwell-Pope but still signing Cancar and the 28th pick, they'd have about \$11 million in wiggle room below the projected second apron number.

This is where the internal development needs to come in, because it's clear that what will have to happen for Denver to have the depth around Jokic and Murray needed to stay on top of a contending mountain. The Nuggets need Braun and Peyton Watson to take a leap. Michael Porter Jr. needs to go from a lethal spot-up shooter to the kind of all-around offensive player he was in his high school and AAU days. It would be nice for the Nuggets if one of the current rookies, perhaps Julian Strawther, can also take a leap this summer. But, maybe most importantly, the Nuggets need to be able to collect data. They need to know which one of their young guys has a chance at panning out, and which are the ones they need to move on from. It makes for a delicate balance that needs to be struck, especially in the regular season, because it's pretty difficult to mesh multiple timelines together. But in this case, with limited financial flexibility, it's necessary.

"We have to be fine with internal development," Booth said. "We have to be an organization that's process-oriented and we have to be mature enough as an organization to live with the results."

Because Jokic and Murray are playing at peak level, the Nuggets are in a good spot. But their financial constraints are starting to show in regards to the roster they can put around their two best players. It's why Braun moved on last summer.

The Nuggets won't carry the weight of a champion next season. It will be a longer and more anticipated offseason for them as they try to figure out what's next. But like Malone intimated, this is a group that should be right back in the mix next season.

"It's about being the hunter," Murray said. "We beat Minnesota in the first round last year. They came in this year with the motivation to beat us and it showed. I'm looking forward to coming back next year and being the hunter."

## Manfred says robot umpires could have 'unintended consequences' to strike zone

By EVAN DREILICH

**New York** — For at least a couple of years, Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred has made clear that if a form of the automated strike zone comes to the majors, he would prefer it to be a challenge system — used a handful of times a game — rather than a system that's employed on every pitch. On Thursday, he said others seem to be coming around to that view, but a lot still remains up in the air regarding the actual implementation of the automatic ball-strike system, or ABS for short, in the majors.

One issue is what shape a strike zone the system would be programmed to recognize. Manfred has said in the past that the strike zone as called by umpires looks more round than one might expect.

"The shape of the strike zone, we have not started those conversations (with players), because we haven't settled on what we think about it," Manfred said. "Hard to have those conversations before you know what you're thinking."

Overall, Manfred said the league has gathered a lot of information from players, though.

"The two biggest learnings: You know,

originally, we thought everybody was going to be wholeheartedly in favor of the idea. If you can get it right every single time, that's a great idea," he said. "One thing we've learned in these meetings is that players feel there could be other effects on the game that would be negative if you used it full-blown."

"The second one is those who have played with it do have a strong preference for the challenge system over ABS calling every pitch and that has certainly altered our thinking on where we might be headed."

Catchers might be the most affected.

"It's the unintended consequences of ABS," Manfred said. "The one that is often pointed to, but not the only one, is the framing catcher. I think that the players feel that a catcher that frames is, in fact, let me use the word, 'art' of the game."

"And if it, in fact, framing is no longer important, the kind of players that would occupy that position might be different than they are today. And you could hypothesize a world where instead of a framing catcher, who's focused on defense, the catching position becomes a more offensive player. I mean, that alters peoples' careers."

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