

NBA's LeBron-Curry-Durant torch has been passed to a new generation

By JOHN HOLLINGER
The Athletic

In Game 1 of the Suns-Timberwolves series, Minnesota's Anthony Edwards sized up Kevin Durant on a switch, easily maneuvered himself open for a 3-pointer, splashed it down and yapped about it to Durant all the way to the other end of the court.

For three more games, it happened over and over again, until Durant's team was unceremoniously swept out of the playoffs Sunday. Finally, the finale was capped by Durant's business decision against Edwards' series-clinching dunk.

Those moments were part of a larger theme. Minnesota's clincher happened just 24 hours before the Denver Nuggets unceremoniously ejected LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers from the postseason. At least they made it that far: Stephen Curry's Golden State Warriors didn't even make the playoffs, torpedoed by the Sacramento Kings in the Play-In Tournament.

With that, the sun has about set on the two-decade run of dominance for this trinity. Durant is 35, Curry is 36 and James is 39. At least one of those three had made the second round of the playoffs every year since 2006; in 2017 and 2018, all three were in the NBA Finals. This season, they combined for one playoff win.

You can turn the triangle into a square by adding Kawhi Leonard: the two-time Finals MVP turns 33 in June and is once again out with knee problems. He's operated at full strength in exactly three of the last 17 LA Clippers playoff games and hasn't finished a season healthy since the 2020 NBA bubble.

Minus those four, we're witnessing a full-on rout of the generation that carried the NBA through the last decade-plus. One of James, Curry, Durant or Leonard was the best player on nine of the 80 NBA



ASHLEY LANDIS / Associated Press. No photo. Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors failed to reach the NBA playoffs this season.

champions from 2011 to 2020 — and those four were so good that they also managed to represent the best player on eight of the 10 teams that lost the NBA Finals in that decade. That's 20 conference champions, 17 of them fronted by one of those four. (Your exceptions being Dirk Nowitzki in 2011 and Jimmy Butler in 2020, while 2013 Leonard wasn't quite yet what we'd see in the following Finals.)

Now, they can't even scratch the second round, except for perhaps Leonard making it as an observer. You wonder if any of the four ever will again as leading men: things might only get worse given their age and team situations, with Curry and James facing second-tier status with the Warriors and Lakers in a crowded Western Conference, and the expensive, flawed and as-set-mined Suns leaving Durant unlikely to contend until he returns to Oklahoma City. (Wait, am I allowed to say that out loud?)

Of course, we've been undergoing a minitransition from that

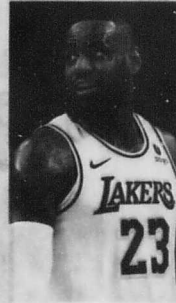


DARRELL WEBB / Associated Press. No photo. Kevin Durant and the Phoenix Suns were swept out of the playoffs by the Minnesota Timberwolves.

guided age for some time. The last five MVP awards have been won by three other gentlemen — Nikola Jokic, Giannis Antetokounmpo and Joel Embiid — and that streak should hit six years when Jokic is bestowed the honor for the third time in the coming weeks.

Even so, for that last half decade, James, Curry, Leonard and Durant still were always there, always a massive part of the conversation. As recently as last year, three of them made the second round of the playoffs, and we weren't that far away from a LeBron versus Durant West final.

Thus, this feels like a seminal moment for the NBA, and perhaps for how it markets itself. Truthfully, this date has been delayed far beyond reasonable expectation by repeated last gasps, such as when James' and Curry's teams won in the first round last season as seventh and sixth seeds, respectively, and guaranteed at least one would make the conference finals year when the Lakers



MARK J. TERRILL / Associated Press. No photo. LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers fell 4-1 to the Denver Nuggets in their first-round playoff series.

cruised through a Charmin-soft bracket and won the first In-Season Tournament.

This postseason, however, feels like the true turning point. The league now belongs to Jokic, the defending champion and likely soon-to-be three-time MVP, besides Joker, there are a cohort of stars roughly a decade or more younger than that trio: All-NBAers Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Luka Doncic and Jayson Tatum, most notably, with Edwards, Tyrese Haliburton and Victor Wembanyama making their case to join them on the pedestal. (It wounds me that I can't confidently type "Ja Morant" here.)

Yes, Antetokounmpo and Embiid are around, too, as are some other prime-age drawing cards (Anthony Davis, Jalen Brunson, Devin Booker and Donovan Mitchell, for instance). Nonetheless, it feels like, other than Jokic and Giannis, we're skipping right past this generation to the next one. Think of how many SGA vs. Luka Red River

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battles we might get over the next decade, for instance, starting perhaps a week from now.

It's a brave new world where the league's best players not only are new (and thus much less familiar) faces, but are mostly in non-glam or markets. Make a list of the 15-20 guys you think will be running the league in 2027; now count how many play for the seven teams in California, New York or Chicago. Depending on your thoughts on Brunson, the answer is either one or none.

That can change of course — once upon a time, James played in Cleveland, Leonard played in San Antonio and Durant played in Oklahoma City. But most of the players I listed above are on good teams in great situations, and the more favorable rules on contract extensions mean few will hit free agency before their 30th birthday. You can never rule out the likelihood, few of the next generation's stars are moving anytime soon.

This is ultimately good for the long-term health of the NBA, especially with James and Curry thus far executing a gentle fade-out while the kids grab the torch; they're still good enough to keep us entertained on a Tuesday night in January, if nothing else, and turn out some extra casuals on Christmas.

But this spring's results have taken us beyond plausible doubt about what's happening: Edwards, Gilgeous-Alexander, Jokic and Doncic are your likely leading men for the West's semifinals, after each of their teams won at least 50 games in the regular season.

Those Edwards-Durant face-offs this past week signified a larger generational shift, that this moment is about much more than the Nuggets. After nearly two decades, a much broader changing of the guard is underway.

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