

Coaching excellence is a bit difficult to discern, even for experienced sports fans. After all, players are the ones who carry out the game's most visible actions while coaches generally pace along the sidelines. Factors might include play-calling, rotation management, motivational prowess, game demeanor, player development, and the overcoming of injuries, among many other things. Maybe it's an "I know it when I see it" type of deal.

Commented [DC1]: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_know_it_when_I_see_it

Perhaps appropriately, criteria for the NBA's Coach of the Year (COY) award are hard to find. However, probably the most widely-used heuristic is the one proposing that the award should be given to the coach of the team that most clearly outperforms projections. Observers form expectations about how a team should perform based (in large part) on its roster construction, and if the team exceeds those expectations by a large margin, the coach is often given the lion's share of credit for the team reaching unexpected heights (rightly or wrongly).

If we use Las Vegas preseason over-under (O/U) lines as an indication of a team's expectations going into a season, the "outperforms expectations" heuristic indeed appears to be used in practice. Outside of Gregg Popovich in 2013-2014, every Coach of the Year in the past decade has finished in the top three in terms of margin over their team's O/U line. Here are some stats on each of the COY winners from 2002-2003 through last year:

YEAR	COACH, TEAM	VEGAS O/U	ACTUAL WINS	DIFFERENTIAL	DIFF. RANK	NOTES
2015-2016	Steve Kerr, GSW	59.5	73	13.5	3	
2014-2015	Mike Budenholzer, ATL	41	60	19	1	
2013-2014	Gregg Popovich, SAS	55.5	62	6.5	6	
2012-2013	George Karl, DEN	48.5	57	8.5	3	
2011-2012	Gregg Popovich, SAS	40.5	50	9.5	2	lockout (66 games)
2010-2011	Tom Thibodeau, CHI	46.5	62	15.5	1	
2009-2010	Scott Brooks, OKC	33.5	50	16.5	2	
2008-2009	Mike Brown, CLE	47.5	66	18.5	1	
2007-2008	Byron Scott, NOH	37.5	56	18.5	1	
2006-2007	Sam Mitchell, TOR	32.5	47	14.5	1	
2005-2006	Avery Johnson, DAL	52.5	60	7.5		
2004-2005	Mike D'Antoni, PHX	44	62	18		
2003-2004	Hubie Brown, MEM	31.5	50	18.5		
2002-2003	Gregg Popovich, SAS	55.5	60	4.5		
Averages	(excluding 2011-2012)	45.04	58.85	13.81		

From the above table, we can also observe the types of team performances that tend to result in a coach winning COY. Excluding the 2011-2012 lockout-shortened season, the average preseason O/U line of a team whose coach wins COY is about 45 wins, which means that in general, those teams aren't expected to be championship contenders. However, those teams go on to win almost 59 games on average and are therefore likely in title contention by most measures. This "decent-to-great" leap is the dominant narrative in many COY seasons.

If it's true that most COY awards are given to coaches of teams that drastically outperform expectations, then this awards distribution pattern makes sense. A team with high expectations coming in to a season

(e.g., Golden State's O/U this year was 66.5 wins) would be hard-pressed to shatter them with the force usually required for their coach to win COY. Conversely, teams with mid-tier or lower-tier expectations have room to surpass projections by large margins. But everything else equal, the NBA (like most sports leagues) tends to confer its individual awards onto members of great teams – that's why teams making the "bad-to-decent" leap don't often produce Coaches of the Year (Doc Rivers of the 1999-2000 Orlando Magic is probably the most recent Coach of the Year to win that way).

Side note: I'm not necessarily advocating for whether COY awards *should* be distributed in this way, just analyzing how they actually are distributed. There are, of course, cases to be made that if a team's expectations are high, the coach's COY case shouldn't inherently be "penalized" for that because he very well might be a large contributing factor to the team's overall strength. In practice, however, most preseason projections and hype are based on roster, not coach; that is, you don't often hear, for example, "I think Coach Jacque Vaughn is going to have a big year" as a reason that a team might break out (mainly because it's Jacque Vaughn, but also because people just don't usually talk about coaches like that).

So, what does the past tell us about this year's Coach of the Year race? Let's look at the O/U lines and FiveThirtyEight projected win totals for this year's likely pool of candidates:

COACH	TEAM	VEGAS O/U	538 PROJ. WINS	DIFFERENTIAL
Mike D'Antoni	HOU	44	56	12
Scott Brooks	WAS	42.5	49	6.5
Erik Spoelstra	MIA	34.5	41	6.5
Gregg Popovich	SAS	57.5	62	4.5
Mike Malone	DEN	37	39	2
Billy Donovan	OKC	45	47	2
Quin Snyder	UTA	47.5	49	1.5
Brad Stevens	BOS	52.5	53	0.5
Steve Kerr	GSW	66.5	66	-0.5

Per the "outperforms expectations" heuristic of defining coaching excellence, we can see that this year's pool might not be as deep as we thought. There have been more loaded COY races in arguably each of the last three seasons – here are the top differentials between actual wins and preseason O/U lines from each of those seasons:

YEAR	COACH	TEAM	DIFFERENTIAL
2015-2016	Terry Stotts	POR	+15.5
	Steve Clifford	CHA	+14
	Steve Kerr	GSW	+13.5
	Gregg Popovich	SAS	+10.5
	Dwane Casey	TOR	+9.5
2014-2015	Mike Budenholzer	ATL	+19
	Jason Kidd	MIL	+16.5
	Steve Kerr	GSW	+14.5
	Brad Stevens	BOS	+13
	Quin Snyder	UTA	+11
2013-2014	Jeff Hornacek	PHX	+27.5
	Steve Clifford	CHA	+17
	Terry Stotts	POR	+15.5
	Dwane Casey	TOR	+12.5
	Scott Brooks	OKC	+7.5

We can also see that it's probably a good bet that Houston Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni will capture the second COY award of his career. It helps that the field is relatively weak, but his team is also the only one to have made the "decent-to-great" leap that characterizes many COY seasons (the Washington Wizards and Scott Brooks could make a late push, however).

D'Antoni would certainly be a deserving Coach of the Year winner, if for no other reason than his trademark offensive innovation. If you thought his Phoenix Suns teams shot a lot of threes, his Rockets this year are attempting 40.3 three-pointers per game (which is almost half of their 87 field goal attempts per game), 6.5 more than the next-highest Cleveland Cavaliers. His free-wheeling spread pick-and-roll attack has unleashed the full extent of James Harden's playmaking abilities – stopping Harden's drives and/or his lobs to Clint Capela is hard enough even after committing extra defenders, but Harden also has the vision to find his three-point snipers (Ryan Anderson, Eric Gordon, Lou Williams, etc.) and the craftiness/strength to get the ball to a shooter anywhere on the court whenever a defender so much as leans the wrong direction.

But if it seems like it's all the work of James Harden, don't forget that it's Mike D'Antoni who is figuring the pick-and-roll variations and counter-moves to keep defenses off balance. The players have relative freedom to deploy the sets that they feel are appropriate for a given situation, but D'Antoni is the one programming those sets.

Check out just a few of these pick-and-roll variations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxHYHaYwNgk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD20GI3UWQI>

All sorts of drag screens, secondary actions, cutters at just the right time, skip passes, etc. The "Spain" pick-and-roll is a cool variation too:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTcEbWWUe3k>

Steve Kerr's team might be the most likely to win the title this year (48% chance, per FiveThirtyEight), and Gregg Popovich might be the NBA's best coach (Zach Lowe has said for a while that it feels like Pop should win COY every year), but don't discount what D'Antoni has done. For some, his validation will never come until he's got #RINGZ (which is stupid), but we also know that if Robert Horry didn't deck Steve Nash in Game 4 of the 2007 West semis (prompting suspensions of Amare Stoudemire and Boris Diaw in Game 5 for leaving the bench, even though they didn't fight anyone), D'Antoni would've had a *really* good chance at the 2007 title.

Well, Coach D'Antoni is going to have another good chance at a title this year, and by the time the playoffs roll around, he'll probably be Coach of the Year D'Antoni. He'll do good work in the playoffs too. You'll know when you see it.

Note: Check out Sports Illustrated's Breakaway podcast episode on Mike D'Antoni's system [here](#) (hosted by Rob Mahoney).

(stats/projections as of Tuesday evening)

Commented [DWC2]: <http://grantland.com/features/mvp-lebron-james-rest-nba-regular-season-awards/>

Commented [DWC3]: <http://www.si.com/nba/breakaway-podcast-sports-illustrated>