

Lessons from the extremely ugly, post-lockout 1999 NBA season

Rich Kraetsch

Things got real ugly on the court after the 1999 NBA lockout. Can the [NBA](#) and its players avoid a similar fate when things return to normal this year?

When [Michael Jordan](#) walked off the Delta Center court an NBA champion in what we assumed to be his final NBA season, the NBA had just put the finishing touches on one of their finest seasons ever.

The hysteria around the league had reached a fever pitch and the sports league of the 1990s seemed poised to continue riding the momentum into the new Millennium.

Well, not exactly.

On July 1, 1998, the NBA officially entered a lockout as players and owners argued over several issues. This was actually the third lockout of the decade as both 1995 and 1996 saw hour-long lockouts before the season but ultimately they were more bravado than anything.

This one though was the real deal.

In March 1998, NBA owners began to renegotiate the NBA's collective bargaining agreement with the intention of re-working the NBA salary cap and sought to put a ceiling on player salaries.

Negotiations broke off on June 22, 1998, and the lockout was underway. During this time teams could not hold workouts or meetings at team facilities and players were left to fend for themselves, unsure when they would be back on the court.

After months of public back and forths between the two sides and without a deal in sight, an ultimatum was set. Then-NBA commissioner David Stern set the date: Jan. 7, 1999. If a deal was not signed by that day, the NBA season would be canceled.

As fate would have it, the lockout ended on Jan. 6, 1999. The players accepted the owner's terms and the 1998-99 season would happen but in an abbreviated and condensed 50-game format.

Games would start in one month (February 5, 1999). What followed was one of the most putrid, offensive NBA seasons in history.

The bad omens began almost immediately as opening night featured a 78-66 game between the Philadelphia 76ers and Charlotte Hornets. The next day, Cleveland and Boston fought to a 77-73 final.

The following week, Utah — fresh off two consecutive NBA Finals appearances — put up on the most pathetic regular-season games of all-time scoring just 56 points in a 71-56 loss to the Seattle SuperSonics. Utah made only 21 of their 68 shot attempts and [Karl Malone](#) led the team with 15 points on 4-of-13 shooting.

On Feb. 21, the defending champion (albeit without, you know, Jordan, [Scottie Pippen](#), [Dennis Rodman](#) and [Phil Jackson](#)) scored just 63 points in a 79-63 loss to the New York Knicks. Not to be overshadowed, the Detroit Pistons scored just 64 points on the very same day losing to the eventual NBA champion San Antonio Spurs 85-64.

A paltry crowd of only 8,258 saw the Atlanta Hawks score 68 points in a loss to the now-pathetic Chicago Bulls. The Bulls were led in scoring that night by a 34-year-old NBA journeyman [Mark Bryant](#). He had 16.

Speaking of the Bulls, on April 10, 1999, they put themselves into the record books as they scored only 49 points in an 82-49 loss to the Miami Heat. Yes, 49 points. In a full game. NBA. Yes, they played all of the minutes. 49.

Normally, I'd follow this up by telling you how many players scored 49 points in a single game that season but to add to the awfulness of the season, it never happened. [Nobody scored 50 points that year](#) with [Grant Hill](#), [Allen Iverson](#) and [Antonio McDyess](#) coming the closest with 46-point games.

When the dust finally settled on the 1998-99 season, fans had witnessed an abomination — the slowest pace in league history and the only time league-wide pace dipped below 90 (88.9). The lockout-shortened season would be the only season in the 3-point era to dip below an effective field goal percentage of 47 (46.6 percent). Even free throw percentage stunk — it was the worst free-throw shooting year since 1967 and one of the 20 worst years percentage-wise in NBA history.

This year featured the sixth-worst average offensive efficiency ever (102.2) with only 1975, 1974, 1976, 1977 and 1978 being worse.

Awful.

The lockout-shortened year ranks 10th in the fewest assists per game ever (20.7) and one of only two seasons in the 3-point era (2006) to be in the bottom-10. Every other season in the bottom-10 took place in either the 1940s or 1950s.

Things were very, very bad.

Players, coaches and teams were not prepared for the season. Numerous players showed up out of shape, most famously Cleveland Cavaliers star [Shawn Kemp](#) who arrived at camp 35 pounds overweight. "Coach, I didn't think we were coming back," said, [according to Cleveland.com](#).

TheRinger's Oral History of the 1999 NBA Lockout gives several [first-hand accounts of the rushed nature of training camps](#), including several players who discussed how difficult it was to get into NBA shape in just a few weeks.

So not only were players ill-prepared for the season but the abbreviated and condensed season saw more back-to-backs than any player was previously used to. Players were gassed. Legs were tired. Bones ached. Players recalled eating more room service than ever that season as they could barely get out of bed to go out to eat.

“The fatigue, most of all, affects shooting. Shooting is precise. If you are fatigued in your arms and upper body, the shot is not going to fall. Then the legs go, and if the legs are tired they can’t elevate.” — [Philadelphia 76ers athletic trainer Lenny Currier](#)

Let’s not forget how different NBA conditioning, training and recovery is. The progress made in those fields over the last handful of years is profound. One can take a look at the 2011 NBA lockout as evidence. A similar scenario to 1999, the 2011 lockout forced teams to play a semi-condensed 66 game regular season but we have very few stories of overweight players or broken down bodies.

Wally Blase, Chicago Bulls assistant athletic trainer in 1999, said in [TheRinger piece](#), “we know now that recovery is just as important as training. There is so much care given to what a guy does when he comes off the court now and how quickly they get in the cold tubs or recovery boots. Even tights. No one was wearing compression tights on a plane back then.”

So what does that tell us about this year? As of this writing, there is no plan in place for the return of the 2019-20 NBA season with the last report being a [potential fall return](#).

Under normal circumstances, I would feel confident saying the basketball we see if and when the NBA returns would be very similar to what we saw when everything stopped. Of course, these aren’t normal circumstances. Like the 1999 lockout, players have been unable to visit team facilities and moreover, players are not allowed to train at other gyms or facilities because of the ongoing pandemic. The onus has been 100 percent on players to workout at home. That means staying in shape at home. Working with trainers... digitally. Getting nutrition advice via Zoom calls.

For players without a court, it means dribbling in the driveway or basement. Miami Heat star [Jimmy Butler](#), realizing that most of his teammates (and himself personally) didn’t have the benefit of a home court, [bought portable hoops for his team](#).

Butler isn’t alone. A recent [New York Times piece](#) on the topic looked at several NBA stars without access to hoops: [Giannis Antetokounmpo](#), [Chris Paul](#), C.J. McCollum and [Jayson Tatum](#). All have gone weeks without shooting a basketball. [Nikola Vucevic](#) is borrowing his neighbor’s driveway to get shots up.

“The Washington Wizards and the Dallas Mavericks said only two of their 17 players initially had access to a basket. Only two of the 16 Denver Nuggets players had a functional rim nearby. The Heat said they were also at 2 for 17 before Butler went on his shopping spree.”

There’s no doubt players are fitter and have better nutrition than they did in 1999. Today’s players don’t use training camp to get into NBA shape as much as refine what they’ve been doing all year. The life of a player is 24/7 with guys working on

their games and their bodies each and every day.

But, again, these aren't normal times.

The one benefit today's players have that those in 1999 definitely did not have is power. If players aren't comfortable with the NBA's timeline to return to play, then the NBA will not be able to move forward. In 1999, players were licking their wounds after a labor dispute loss. When the league said jump, the player had no choice but to ask "How high?" In normal circumstances, today's players would and should be ready to go in a month's time. Given the inability for much of the league to workout on any reasonable level, it's impossible to know what type of basketball we'll see.

Can today's NBA players get up to speed in a month or a few weeks? Will the 2020 NBA fall victim to the same pitfalls we saw in 1999? It's impossible to say right now without a clear deadline in place but everyone from players, coaches, teams and owners need to be mindful of just how poor the 1999 season was for the NBA.

While losing Jordan was a huge blow to the NBA's popularity, the 1999 lockout and subsequent laughably bad season did it no favors. The NBA suffered years of tanking ratings and perception problems in the years that followed. While nobody is blaming the NBA or any sports league for the current lack of activity, it won't be as easy to overlook once the games start.