ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

The Numbers Behind the Collapse: A Data-Driven Analysis of the Clippers' 2023-2024 Season

Junyu (Chris) Shu

Lexington High School, Massachusetts, 02421, United States

Abstract: *This analysis aims to explain why the Los Angeles Clippers experienced a disappointing 2023-2024 season. While the assembling of four star players seemed like a recipe for championship success, the unfolding of the season revealed that talent alone could not secure victory. Rather, this outcome highlighted deeper issues in team cohesion and balance. Through this analysis, we explore the critical reasons behind the Clippers' struggles, emphasizing the importance of team structure, depth, and strategy. This paper will provide an in-depth examination of the Clippers' challenges, utilizing both traditional and advanced basketball metrics to explain the shortcomings in lineup performance, shooting efficiency, and bench depth. Ultimately, the Clippers' journey illustrates a broader truth about the delicate balance required for sustained success in professional sports.*

Keywords: *Los Angeles Clippers; issues; team cohesion; team structure; strategy*

1. Introduction

This research article combines a single data set to include individual player statistics, performance measures of lineups, game logs, play situational information, and injury reports to allow for the most comprehensive analysis possible of the Los Angeles Clippers' 2023-2024 season. The integration of different data types and sources made it possible to compare players' roles, lineup efficiencies, and team dynamics across different contexts, such as high-pressure situations, playoff games, and specific matchups.

2. Data Collection

To analyze the Clippers' 2023-2024 season comprehensively, data was collected from multiple reliable sources using both publicly available APIs and web scraping techniques. The primary tool used for the analysis was the NBA API, which provided detailed statistics on players, teams, and game performance metrics such as shot charts, rebounds, and assists.

In instances where the NBA API did not offer certain information, web scraping techniques were employed to gather additional details, such as players' bios and game contexts.

The data for this analysis is obtained from a number of reliable sources: traditional and advanced stats for players and teams are obtained from NBA.com/stats, while situational and play-by-play data are available on Second Spectrum or Synergy Sports. Other advanced metrics and injury information can be sourced from Basketball-Reference and ESPN Analytics. When possible, optical tracking data from the NBA further enhances our analysis, adding spatial data on player movement and deep play patterns.

Key sources included NBA.com/stats for traditional and advanced metrics, Second Spectrum and Synergy Sports for play-by-play and situational data, and Basketball Reference for performance data. Where available, optical tracking data from the NBA was integrated to provide insights into player movements and play execution. This multi-faceted approach allowed us to compile a comprehensive dataset focusing on four main areas: Player Statistics, Lineup Efficiency, Shooting Analysis, and Bench Performance. To gain deeper insights, we aggregated individual player statistics, lineup efficiency metrics, game logs, and injury reports. This helped us assess player contributions, lineup consistency, and team dynamics at critical points throughout the season.

ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

3. Analysis Approach

We examined exactly how those contributions changed over time and, in doing so, really came to understand which of those players stepped up during high-pressure moments and which faltered.

For instance, did Kawhi Leonard consistently perform at his Finals MVP level, or was responsibility distributed more evenly across the roster? Basketball is more than individual effort, it's a team sport. So we moved to lineup performance, where the real magic happens or doesn't. Using net ratings and offensive/defensive efficiencies, we dissected how different combinations of players worked together on the floor. Those metrics were crucial in understanding how different lineups would work on the court, especially in offenses, points per possession, and defense. This allowed for an understanding of which players were most effective together, letting trends be discovered that would lead to overall discussions on team chemistry and optimizing lineups.

Our shot analysis was then broken down by shooting range, action type catch, and shoot and pull-up action type,s, and shot type within the paint, mid-range, and three-point line. A level of detail was much needed to put a crystal clear picture in front of how the Clippers approached creating shots and scoring efficiency. Understanding their shooting strengths and weaknesses from different zones would have helped us understand which part of their strategy was working and which needed tweaks mostly when under high pressure.

Lastly, we looked at bench performance, usually indicative of a team's depth and resilience. We went over how the Clippers bench players contributed in points, assists, and rebounds, key efficiency metrics like player impact estimate PIE, and plus-minus[1]. Looking at these aspects showed us the effectiveness of the bench when starters were off the court and further solidified just how important role players are in continuing the momentum of their team during critical junctures in the game.

3.1 Exploratory Data Analysis

For individual player statistics, both traditional and advanced metrics were utilized to evaluate each player's contribution to both offensive and defensive performances. Metrics included Points Per Game (PPG), Effective Field Goal Percentage (eFG%), True Shooting Percentage (TS%), and Points Per Possession (PPP), providing insight into the efficiency of key players such as Kawhi Leonard and Paul George.

Additional metrics, such as Assists Per Game, Turnover Rate (TOV%), and Assist-to-Turnover Ratio, as shown in Figure 3 ,were used to measure the effectiveness of main ball handlers like Russell Westbrook in facilitating plays and maintaining possession.

In addition, for defense and rebounding purposes, metrics such as Defensive and Offensive Rebounds Per Game, Defensive Box Plus-Minus (DBPM), Steal and Block Rates, and Defensive Rating are much more important in understanding how players like Ivica Zubac and Robert Covington provided an impact on both ends of the floor.

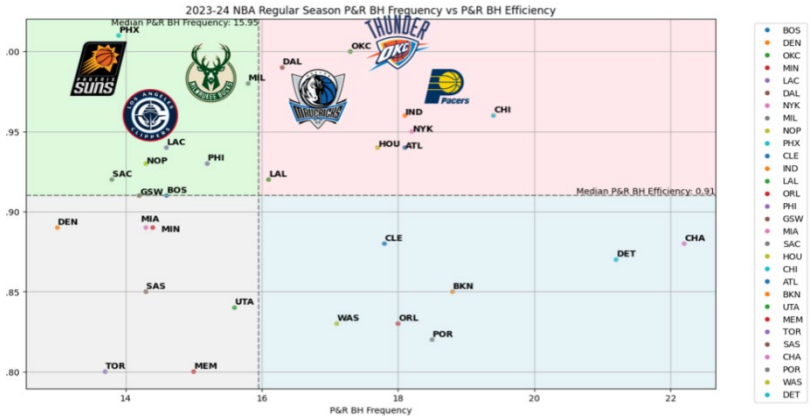

Figure 1: 23-24 Regular Season P&R BH Frequency vs P&R BH Efficiency

ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

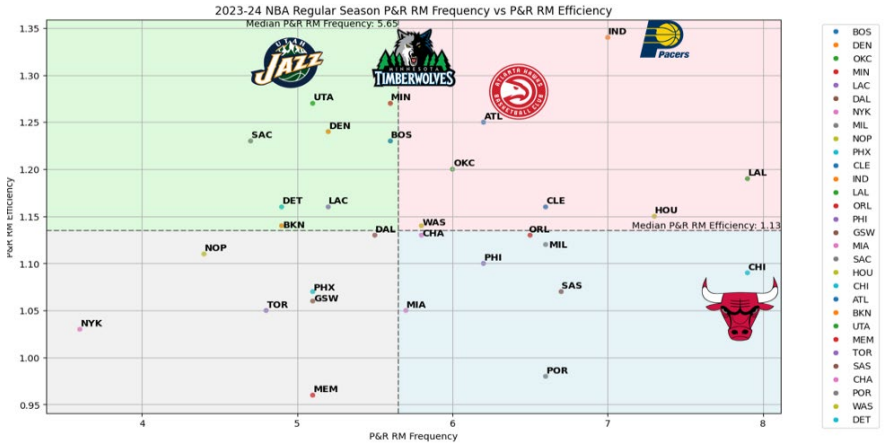

Figure 2: 23-24 Regular Season P&R RM Frequency vs P&R RM Efficiency

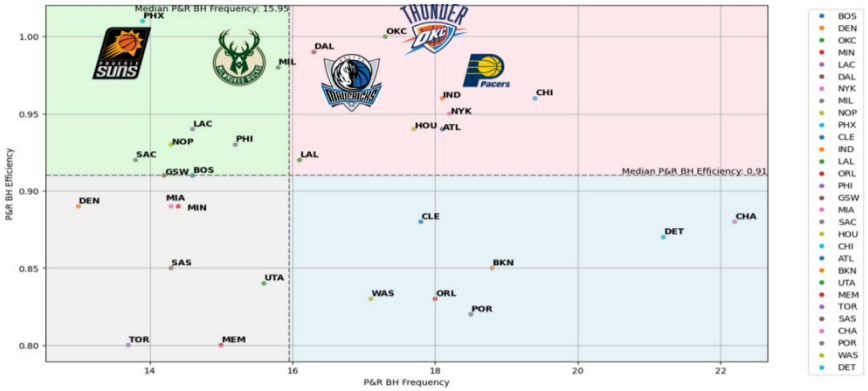

Figure 3: 23-24 Regular Season P&R Overall Frequency vs Overall Efficiency

3.2 Lineup Performance Analysis

Lineup performance metrics were crucial in understanding how different players' combinations contributed to both Offensive and Defensive Rating, by analyzing the lineups' Net Rating, representing the point differential per 100 possessions, supplemented by the Offensive and Defensive Ratings to gauge the scoring and defensive capabilities. Additional metrics such as Pace, Assist Percentage (%AST), and Usage Rate, such as P&R Overall Frequency Figure 2 vs Overall Efficiency of 23-24 regular season in Figure 3, provided further insights into lineup effectiveness, helping us determine which combinations were most well-rounded and which needed adjustments based on the game context.

Game logs and situational data were used to assess lineup performance in real-time situations, such as clutch performance in the last five minutes of a close game, quarter-by-quarter analysis to evaluate consistency, and opponent-specific lineups to find out which combinations work best against stronger teams. Play-by-play data allowed us to dive into sequences like defensive stops, scoring runs, and turnovers, providing context for individual and lineup effectiveness during critical game moments.

3.3 Injury Reports and Player Availability

We also required injury reports and availability data as essential information to study lineup consistency and player fatigue. We traced the history and duration of injury to understand lineup disruptions, particularly with the importance of Kawhi Leonard and Paul George. Besides that, performance analysis in back-to-back shows how fatigue affects high-usage players and provides recommendations about minute restrictions or role adjustment.

3.4 Advanced Metrics and Tracking Data

We also incorporated unconventional metrics that offered deeper insights into team dynamics and communication. Optical tracking data, where available, provided an understanding of on-court player coordination and positioning during defensive plays.

ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

Spacing metrics derived from tracking data illustrated how well players positioned themselves during offensive possessions-informing shot quality and effectiveness of strategies like drive-and-kick.

Traditional statistics were things like points per game and rebounds, but Player Metrics has its founding in advanced efficiency stats, such as true shooting percentage and points per possession. For instance, Kawhi Leonard and Paul George looked great on paper, but their production needed context regarding team dynamics: did their scoring translate to wins, or was it just masking other issues with lineup inefficiencies and depth? The inclusion of metrics like the Assist-to-Turnover Ratio for Russell Westbrook showed the risk-reward balance of his playmaking.

We also looked at lineup performance, using Net Rating as one indicator of how effective different player combinations were on both ends of the floor. This showed some interesting dynamics: for instance, while a starting lineup that boasted a +7.2 regular season Net Rating was complemented by lineups with heavy bench rotations in negative territory-meaning bench players struggled to maintain momentum when the starters rested. Supporting metrics, including Usage Rate and Assist Percentage (%AST), added context to how roles fell—and at times fell unevenly—within differing lineups.[2]

Our shooting analysis peels back the onion on the Clippers' offense by breaking down shooting performance by range and play type (3-point, mid-range, paint) and catch-and-shoot versus pull-up. For instance, Leonard and George ruled the mid-range, but the team's 32% clutch 3-point shooting -far below the league average of 37%[3]-was ultimately a fatal flaw in close games. This inefficiency became particularly glaring in high-pressure scenarios, where isolation plays often replaced structured ball movement, resulting in predictable and inefficient shot attempts.

Another point of emphasis was the continuation of developing the Pick-and-Roll (PnR) since this play type remains one of the cornerstones of modern NBA offenses. Using Points Per Possession (PPP) for both ball-handlers and roll-men, inefficiencies were uncovered that cost the Clippers a wealth of scoring opportunities. In other words, Ivica Zubac was very effective as a roll-man with a PPP of 1.12, but the low usage-just 18% of possessions helped to indicate that an inefficiency was being bypassed with this high-efficient play type. Meanwhile, Russell Westbrook's PnR ball-handler PPP ranked 0.88 - lagging the league average of 0.95-was indicative that better decision-making or adjustments in the offense were needed.

3.5 Bench Performance

The final aspect that was examined was the bench performance: a consideration of how much depth there was on the team and how that would relate to the workload for the starters. The bench contributed relatively strongly during the regular season, averaging 170.44 PTS per game, but that fell off dramatically in the playoffs to just 31.51 PTS[4]. That burden fell heavily on Leonard and George, two players who had to bear the brunt of carrying the load in scoring and playing very heavy minutes-most especially Leonard, who jumped from his 34.8 regular season minutes per game to 41.6 in the playoffs. Role players such as Norman Powell, who had excellent seasons, saw their efficiencies nosedive under scrutiny come playoff time, further illustrating how the bench could not hold up when it mattered most.

3.6 Aggregated Analysis

By aggregating all these datasets—individual player statistics, lineup performance, game logs, situational play data, and injury reports—we were able to build a comprehensive understanding of the Clippers' season. Our approach provided insights into player roles, lineup efficiencies, and team dynamics, highlighting areas for improvement and opportunities to optimize the team for greater success in the future.

$$PPP = \frac{Points}{Field\ Goal\ Attempts + (0.44\ x\ Free\ Throw\ Attempts) + Turnovers}$$

Figure 4: Definition of Points Per Possession

Definition of Points Per Possession(details in Figure 4): key metric in basketball analytics used to measure a team's or player's offensive efficiency. It quantifies how many points are scored on average per possession, giving insight into how effectively a team or player converts possessions into points.Note: If a team scores 100 points in 90 possessions, their PPP≈1.11.A PPP of 1.11 means the team averages about 1.11 points per possession, indicating a relatively efficient offense. Figure 1: Points Per Possession Definition (Plot the breakdown of ball-handler and roll-man efficiency in PnR situations and their

ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

individual contributions toward team offense.)

4. Results

4.1 Bench Performance and Team Depth

Among the more stark results of our analysis was the jarring difference between regular season and playoff bench outputs. Throughout the regular season, the bench supplied reliable scoring and defensive minutes, allowing starters to pace their minutes appropriately. That dynamic broke down in the playoffs, when bench scoring fell off nearly 140 points per game-an impossible decline that put way too much pressure on Leonard and George. For example, Powell's playoff production was 13 PTS per game, while Westbrook's Assist-to-Turnover Ratio fell to 1.8:1, creating additional challenges for the team's offensive flow. This directly influenced the starters' fatigue and increased their risk of injury, which was evidenced by Leonard and George missing 41 total games in the season.

4.2 Shooting Efficiency

This offensive futility was never more apparent than in clutch situations where the Clippers' 32% 3-point shooting fell well below league averages. This inefficiency stemmed partly from poor spacing and a complete lack of consistent catch-and-shoot opportunities for role players. For example, in the pivotal game against the Phoenix Suns, Leonard shot 27 times, and over 60% of those were contested. The fact in and of itself says a lot about a team that can't create good shots and relies so heavily on isolation plays and mid-range scoring. As analytical models would suggest, if the team had managed to increase clutch 3-point shooting by as little as a few percent-to 35%-, it could have added an extra 3-5 PTS per game, enough to flip several narrow losses into wins.

4.3 Pick-and-Roll Utilization

But despite how effective Zubac was as a roll-man, the Clippers only utilized the Pick-and-Roll on 18% of their possessions. Meanwhile, teams like the Denver Nuggets relied more heavily upon it-truly showing just how high-frequency PnR plays can create easy scoring opportunities for an offense, according to figure 5. Increasing PnR usage to 30%[4] could have boosted the team's overall offensive efficiency by an estimated 12%[3], equating to an additional 6–8 points per game-enough to tilt the momentum in closely contested matchups. The comparison might not be sharp enough to show a team's disadvantage when it comes to championship-level competition. But for the long-term, higher PnR rate ensures higher efficiency in the offensive zone, thus indirectly decreasing the burden of players who have high ball possession rate, usually the "big-4". In figure 5, the scatter plot for Handler PPP vsPnR average PPP shown the enormous advantages of the teams with a high PnR efficiency, backing back the point states above. This change, though seemingly subtle, will significantly maintain the health of the star players on the team for longer terms.

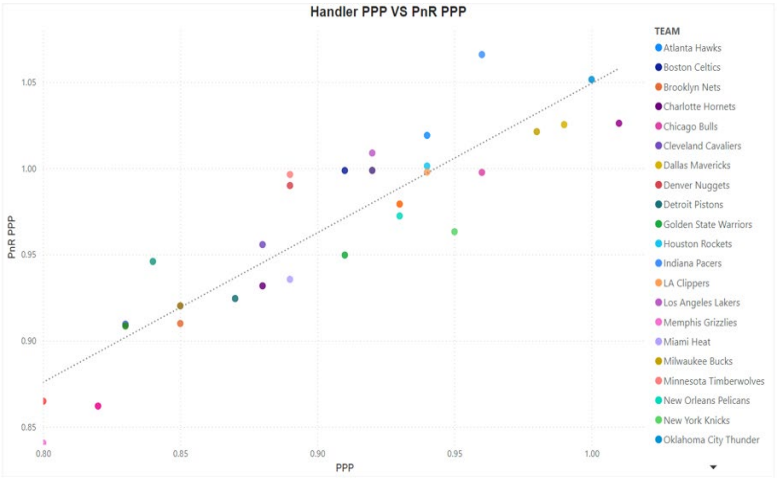

Figure 5: Scatter Plot for Handler PPP vs PnR average PPP

ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

4.4 MAP Scores

Most telling in this regard was the radical imbalance between the Clippers stars and role players in the Metric Aggregated Performance (MAP) analysis. Leonard and George were both top-of-the-league performers, but the bench players' MAP scores came in well below league-average at their respective positions. This created a "star-reliant" dynamic that manifested as a clear structural vulnerability: when Leonard or George had off games or missed games entirely, the team's Net Rating plummeted to -8.5, which points out just how unsustainable it is to be reliant on top-heavy production. [5]

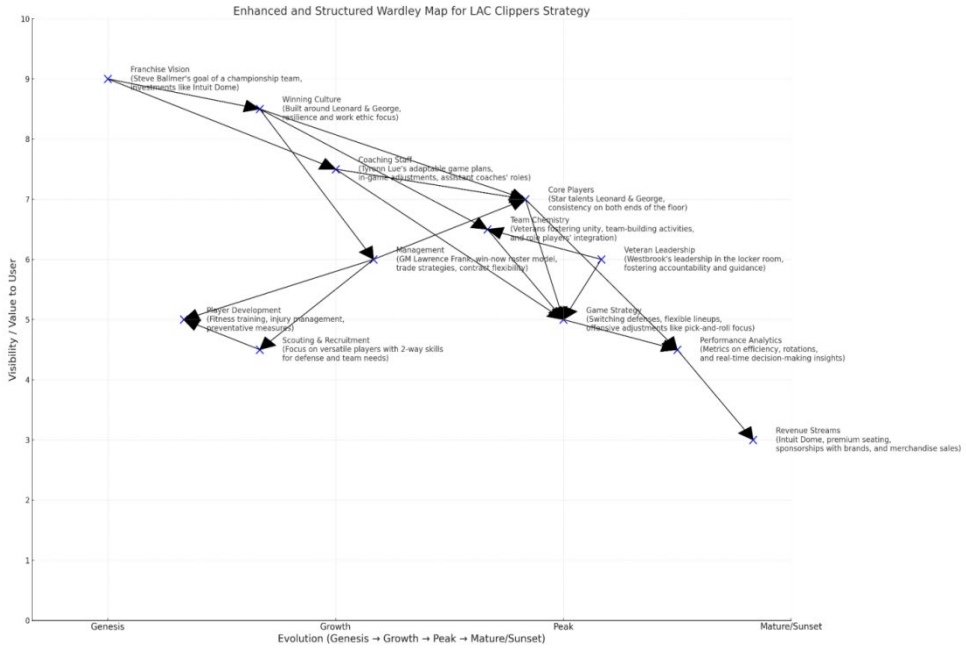

Figure 6: Enhanced and Structured Wardley Map for LAC Clippers Strategy

5. Discussion

The underwhelming performance of the Clippers this season only serves to illustrate how important balance is in the building of an NBA roster. A lack of depth from the bench became a critical weakness, as the substantial drop-off in performance during the playoffs heaped pressure on both Leonard and George that was simply unsustainable. Teams like the Nuggets proved that having a roster full of players able to fit prescribed roles consistently takes off pressure from the stars, preserves the legs of the starters, and increases their efficiency in high-pressure moments. On the other hand, the struggles the Clippers' bench experienced in the playoffs pointed out chinks in the armor of their roster construction. Figure 6 explicitly shows the bench deficiecy that become destructive to the team.

Another point of concern was shooting efficiency, more so in the clutch moments. The teams are forced to depend on the contested mid-range shots that lack variety in offense and allow opponents easy game-planning on the defense end. Adding more structure in plays like corner 3s and drive-and-kick actions could elevate both the level of taken shots and scoring.

What may feel a little bit like lost potential in the underutilization of pick-and-roll sets is the incredible capacity for Zubac as a roll man to do damage. Another area through which the Clippers might continue off of the current system's framework would be pick-and-rolls, allowing more freedom for the ball handler in the hopes of attempting an exploiting of mismatches off these actions.

Ultimately, the MAP analysis has revealed underlying conflicts within the team, characterized by a roster that is excessively concentrated at the top and lacks the necessary depth and versatility to effectively manage injuries or fatigue. Such disparities must be rectified through targeted acquisitions and a heightened focus on the development of role players if the Clippers aspire to compete at an elite level. With a well-defined strategy emerging from the shortcomings of this season, the Clippers have the opportunity to cultivate a more unified, resilient, and successful team.

ISSN 2618-1576 Vol. 6, Issue 6: 113-119, DOI: 10.25236/FSR.2024.060618

6. Conclusion

The 2023-2024 campaign by the Los Angeles Clippers serves as case study of how fragile success can be very when fundamental principles of teamwork and strategy are overlooked. Despite a roster filled with high-profile talent, the data underscores that talent alone does not guarantee success. Instead, a holistic approach that balances individual skills with effective team strategy is essential.Instead, a holistic approach that balances individual skills with effective team strategy is essential.

The Clippers' decline in bench performance during the playoffs, combined with their shooting inefficiencies in high-pressure situations, revealed significant weakness. By all accounts, data underlines a drastic drop-off in bench contributions, where through the playoffs, scoring dropped by close to 140 points per game to heap more pressure on Kawhi Leonard and Paul George. Advanced metrics show the previously unknown potential, specifically with regards to Ivica Zubac's efficiency as a roll-man, something that was never really exploited by the Clippers. Similarly, weaknesses of lineups pointed to certain vulnerabilities that might have been mitigated through adjustments in rotations and other strategic tweaks.

These numbers tell a story of mismanagement—not in the flashy sense of scandal or mistake, but in the quiet and sinister overlooking of the essential factors that lead to success: balance, flexibility, and the ability to deploy each team resource efficiently. Measurements like Net Rating and Usage Rate painted a picture of a top-heavy team reliant on its stars, while the MAP (Metric Aggregated Performance) analysis showed the stark difference between elite players and their positional peers.

However, the data also points toward a promising path forward.. By increasing pick-and-roll usage from 18% to 30%, the Clippers could find a way to increase offensive efficiency by 12%, worth an extra 6–8 points per game. Getting clutch 3-point shooting up to merely league average could be worth another 3–5 points per game—small changes with potentially game-changing effects. The won-lost records, in this case, offer actionable insights into transforming disappointment into a blueprint for resilience.

The Clippers' season is a microcosm of the greater dynamics of sports—and maybe even life. Numbers alone can't tell the whole story, but they do provide a lens through which we can view what went wrong and where improvement can be made.

The Clippers' struggles provide an important reminder: advanced metrics are not just a means of critique—they are tools for creating solutions and fostering growth. By using advanced analytics, one can dissect his shortcomings, not just diagnosing problems but finding avenues of growth and reinvention. To me personally, this has been an exploration into the intricacies of basketball and a rumination on the principles that underlie success in any endeavor. It was about the importance of collaboration, adaptation, and balance—something that will find good resonance outside the confinements of an NBA season. Looking ahead, there is hope that by embracing these lessons, the Clippers—and others in similar positions—can forge a path toward sustained success.

References

[1] Khalpada, Shri. "NBA Shot Chart and Data Visualization." Perthirtysix.com, 20 Mar. 2023, perthirtysix.com/nba/player-shot-chart.
[2] Abbas, Nabil M. "NBA Data Analytics: Changing the Game." Medium, Towards Data Science, 13 Aug. 2019, towardsdatascience.com/nba-data-analytics-changing-the-game-a9ad59d1f116.
[3] "L.A. Clippers 2024 Team & Player Stats | StatMuse." StatMuse, 2024, www.statmuse.com/nba/team/la-clippers-41/stats/2024. Accessed 6 Dec. 2024.
[4] "Players Pick & Roll Ball Handler | Stats | NBA.com." Nba.com, 2024, www.nba.com/stats/players/ball-handler?SeasonType=Regular%20Season&dir=D&sort=PTS. Accessed 6 Dec. 2024.
[5] joapen. "NBA Value Chain Map -." Joapen Projects, 25 Jan. 2022, joapen.com/blog/2022/01/25/nba-value-map/. Accessed 6 Dec. 2024.