

OPINION

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Playoff Season by the Numbers: Something Magic in South Florida?

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The Miami Heat have emerged as the NBA Eastern Conference champion and are headed to the NBA Finals — after working their way through the [NBA playoff play-in tournament](#) as a No. 8 seed. Along the way, they defeated both the Eastern Conference No. 1 and 2 seeds, the Milwaukee Bucks and the Boston Celtics, who also had the most wins in the [NBA regular season](#) this year (58 and 57 wins, respectively), compared to the Heat's 44 wins. They will now take on the [Denver Nuggets](#), who are the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference.

There is an eerie similarity between what is unfolding in the NBA playoffs with what is occurring in the NHL playoffs.

Just a few weeks ago, the NHL's No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference, the Boston Bruins, were defeated by the Florida Panthers, who barely snuck into the playoffs as the second wildcard team. [Boston set an NHL record](#) for most points in a season (135) and most wins (65). In typical David-versus-Goliath fashion, they were upset by the Panthers in seven games. Florida showed it was no fluke by proceeding to defeat Toronto and Carolina, who had 111 and 113 points, respectively, this season, compared to Florida's 92 points. They will now take on the [Las Vegas Golden Knights](#), who are the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference.

These features make the Florida NBA and NHL teams' paths to their league finals understandable, albeit unpredictable.

The Heat were the [No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference in 2022](#). They faced the No. 2 seed Celtics in the Conference Final, where the Celtics prevailed. The Heat proceeded to [revamp their roster](#), as many teams do after a disappointing playoff

loss. Although they were a No. 8 seed this year, the fundamental bones of their previous season were still present. Taking a full regular season to recapture their poise is not surprising.

A similar pattern holds true with the Panthers. They had [122 points and 58 wins in the 2021-2022 regular season](#), the most in the league. They managed to win their first-round series, but they stumbled in the Eastern Conference semi-finals in four straight games against the Tampa Bay Lightning. Last July, [the Panthers traded for Matthew Tkachuk](#), giving away their leading scorer and other future assets. Throughout most of the season, they did not look like a playoff team. They then caught fire in the final month of the regular season and clinched the last wildcard spot.

The key takeaway from both these situations is that both the Heat and Panthers went from being at the top of their conferences to near the bottom in one season. This suggests that the core of both teams was sound, and [reversion to the mean](#) tells us that they were better in the current season than their regular season records indicate.

Playoff performance is also different than regular season performance. Regular season games are played against the entire spectrum of quality, sometimes in back-to-back games. The playoffs pit the same teams against each other in a best-of-seven series, allowing both teams to adjust to the strengths and tendencies of their opponent. This is an advantage to the weaker team, since they can dampen the impact of their superior opponent over a small number of games, while over any extended number of games, the better team will prevail.

What is also worth noting is how sports success this spring is flourishing in Miami (which is dubbed the [Magic City](#)). Back in April, two Miami-based teams made the [NCAA Men's Basketball Final Four](#) (University of Miami Hurricanes and Florida Atlantic University Owls).

At the same time, the Celtics and the Bruins both had high hopes for long playoff runs and winning their championships, providing Boston a veil of gloom this spring.

What is certain is that the best teams do not always win the championship. Between [2001 and 2022](#), 10 of the 22 NBA champions were a No. 1 seed. This is good news for the Nuggets. The bad news for the Heat is that the worst seed to win the championship over this time period was a No. 3 seed.

The Panthers marginally have history on their side. The [2006 No. 8 seed Edmonton Oilers](#) and the [2017 wildcard Nashville Predators](#) both made the Stanley Cup Finals before losing to the eventual champions. The big winners were the [Los Angeles Kings](#) in 2012, who won the Stanley Cup as a No. 8 seed, [losing just four games along the way](#).

What this data shows is that no matter how well a team performs during the regular season, the playoffs are a whole new game — both for the players and the fans. That is why the games are played on the court and in a rink, not on paper.

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