

NBA Cup a huge success in third year

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USA TODAY

On Tuesday night Dec. 16, for the third time, there was a new NBA Cup champion crowned.

The San Antonio Spurs played the New York Knicks in Las Vegas to culminate the third playing of the event. Now that it has become a staple of the NBA calendar, is it actually working?

By many metrics, the NBA Cup has been a resounding success.

More than 40 million viewers tuned in for group stage games, a 90% year-over-year increase. It was the most-watched group stage in the Cup's three seasons. Headed into the quarterfinals, the international audience for NBA Cup games had also jumped, by 10%. Factoring in the high-profile Spurs-Thunder semifinal matchup over the weekend, that number is presumably even higher.

"It's growing," Hall of Fame guard and current Amazon Prime analyst Steve Nash told USA TODAY Sports in a phone interview. "The importance to the players and coaches is growing. That is, I think, the genesis of the success we're going to see as it continues to grow."

Those gains are evident through the league's social channels, too.

Through the quarterfinals, content from NBA Cup games garnered 2.6 billion views across the NBA's social and digital platforms, a 38% growth from last season. Content from NBA Cup days, on average, yielded 24% more views than non-Cup days.

The event has infused an element of competition that would otherwise be lacking during a stretch of the calendar when fans might be distracted by college football and the NFL.

And for the players, it's no surprise that the financial incentive to win carries weight.

Each player on the NBA Cup championship team will claim an additional \$530,933.

"When I see the court, I'm like, it's just time to win the money," Timberwolves forward Jaden McDaniels said Nov. 7, according to The Minneapolis Star Tribune. "We ain't been to Vegas one time. At least come in first, second, or third, we get a little bit of money. So, whichever one we come in, I'm cool – we get a little wire transfer."

It's not just the players; the NBA Cup is also making the league money. Marketing partnerships have increased successively each season of the event, and the number of partners this year, 14, is double what it was during the inaugural playing in 2023.

It has also helped that, this year, premier NBA Cup games have been packaged on a new broadcast partner that has drawn positive reviews. In its first full season broadcasting NBA games, Amazon Prime has been a solid addition to the portfolio. Alongside Nash, former players like Dirk Nowitzki, Blake Griffin, Dwyane Wade and John Wall (among others)



The NBA Cup Trophy was displayed on the court after the semifinal between the Spurs and the Thunder at T-Mobile Arena on Dec. 12. KIRBY LEE/IMAGN IMAGES

have treated pre- and postgame content as opportunities to educate fans about the inner workings of the game. Rejecting hot take and debate culture, the Amazon broadcasts have become appointment viewing.

Yet, there's still work to be done.

Although audience, engagement and attendance are all up since the introduction of the event, the league will continue to monitor ways it can improve the NBA Cup and might incorporate changes in the coming season to maximize reach and profit.

"It's not perfect," Nash continued. "Change is difficult. Trying to build something new is never straightforward, so there's going to be bumps in the road. But, overall, I see how it's gaining importance – from players and coaches, but how that all trickles down to the fans, too."

'Change the courts, please'

To market the tournament, the NBA contracted artist Victor Solomon the past two seasons to design custom alternate courts for each team to be used during Cup games. This is not new; the league also used alternate courts in the first iteration of the event in 2023, which was then known as the NBA In-Season Tournament. But the alternate floors, at best, have drawn mixed reviews.

Safety concerns emerged this season after Los Angeles Lakers guards Luka Dončić and Austin Reaves complained about the surface at Crypto.com Arena being slick.

"Change the courts, please," Dončić told reporters Nov. 25 after the Lakers beat the Clippers on their alternate NBA Cup floor. "It's just slippery. It's dangerous."

Dončić's concerns reached the Lakers front office, which elevated the matter. Eventually, prior to the team's following home NBA Cup game Dec. 11 against the

Spurs, the alternate court had been returned to the vendor for repairs, according to ESPN. The Lakers played on their primary floor instead. The move, ESPN reported, was made out of an abundance of caution.

The night prior, during an NBA Cup Eastern Conference quarterfinal game against the Miami Heat, the Orlando Magic also played on their primary court, though that was because their NBA Cup court was damaged while held in storage.

Fans are engaging with the NBA Cup because of the product atop the floor, not the paint on it. If anything, the unconventional – if not dizzying – colors and designs can detract from the viewing experience.

This season the most controversial court was Minnesota's, which drew widespread disapproval Nov. 7, when the Timberwolves first played on it, against the Utah Jazz.

The court was overwhelmingly fluorescent, almost like a giant green screen. It was so bright that, when cameras zoomed in on players' faces during the broadcast, they were underlit in a hazy, green glow.

"It's an honor to step on an NBA court," Jazz coach Will Hardy said after the game, "no matter how ugly that court is."

This is a case where subtlety might make more sense. The NBA should distinguish its NBA Cup courts to further heighten the stakes of the event, but it can do so in a more understated way. Perhaps, the league could incorporate a smaller decal or image of the NBA Cup trophy, or signage similar to the popular NBA Finals text that used to be visible near midcourt during the championship series.

The NBA Cup spawns questions about dense scheduling

John Hollinger of The Athletic con-

cluded in a recent article that the NBA Cup's schedule has imposed further strain on the bodies of NBA players. The 2025-26 season has seen various soft-tissue injuries to some of the game's biggest stars including Wembanyama and Giannis Antetokounmpo. Hollinger hypothesized that road travel for Cup games might in part be contributing to early fatigue.

NBA chief communications officer Mike Bass pushed back against that claim in a statement posted Dec. 11 on social media. In the message, Bass cited data and said "The Cup has objectively not led to a denser league-wide schedule in the early part of the season."

Injuries across the NBA are almost certainly multifactorial, from the steady increasing of pace and average velocity across the league this season, to the extension of the basketball calendar with EuroBasket and international competition. There simply isn't enough data to determine the impact of the NBA Cup on injuries.

Spreading travel days over a longer period, however, would be an easy step to ease any potential exhaustion players might be feeling.

Where does the NBA Cup go from here?

Players, by and large, thrive on competition. Initially, back in the inaugural year of the event, there was some confusion about the merits of the tournament.

"It's weird, because the energy, you can tell is like something is happening," then-Bucks player Damian Lillard said in November 2023 during a postgame interview. "But it's new so I'm not really sure what the hell is going on. It seems like a moment – the court, the uniforms, TV game and all that, but I don't think nobody really knows what's going on. We just trying to get to Vegas."

As players have had more experience in Cup games, however, that sentiment has largely faded.

The quality of matchups and storylines, however, will determine the success of the NBA Cup. The Western Conference semifinal upset on Dec. 12, when the Spurs toppled the Oklahoma City Thunder in Wembanyama's return from a 12-game, calf strain absence, flashed the potential of what the Cup can be: the established power, the defending NBA champion Thunder were challenged by upstarts. Some of the game's brightest stars – Wembanyama and reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Shai Gilgeous-Alexander – had to will their teams.

If the Cup can become a playoff-lite, a precursor to the drama of May and June, the event will thrive.

The buy-in has already started. Sustaining it will be imperative.

"As competitors, we want to win every game," Wembanyama told reporters on Dec. 15. "And this one brings something new to the table, so we want to win it even more."

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