

FRANCHISE DOMINANCE

by

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In 2021, the National Basketball Association (NBA) celebrated the 75th anniversary of its creation, beginning first as the Basketball Association of America and then changing its name three years later after the National Basketball League merged with it. And during those three score and 15 years, amazingly five franchises—Minneapolis/Los Angeles, Boston, Philadelphia/San Francisco/Golden State, Chicago, and San Antonio—won 68% of the league championships. This percentage is much better than that of the top quintet of title holders for this same period in the National Football League (NFL), 39%, and Major League Baseball (MLB), 49%, and even higher than that of the National Hockey League (NHL), 59%, despite the fact that the last organization had only six franchises competing for over a fourth of this time. For that matter, the NFL and MLB have three franchises tied for fourth place on their lists, but even if all three are used in this comparison, the NBA remains unsurpassed at 68% to the NFL's 45% and MLB's 55%.

As the following table shows, the combination of Lakers, Celtics, Warriors, Bulls, and Spurs trumps all NFL, MLB, and NHL fivesomes as well as the first two leagues' sixsomes.

NBA Franchise: Titles, 1947-2021	NFL Franchise: Titles, 1947-2021	MLB Franchise: Titles, 1947-2021	NHL Franchise: Titles, 1947-2021
Minneapolis/Los Angeles Lakers: 17	Green Bay Packers: 7	New York Yankees: 17	Montreal Canadiens: 18
Boston Celtics: 17	Pittsburgh Steelers: 6	Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers: 7	Toronto Maple Leafs: 8
Philadelphia/San Francisco/Golden State Warriors: 6	New England Patriots: 6	St. Louis Cardinals: 5	Detroit Red Wings: 8
Chicago Bulls: 6	New York Giants: 5	New York/San Francisco Giants: 4	Edmonton Oilers: 5
San Antonio Spurs: 5	Dallas Cowboys: 5	Philadelphia/Kansas City/Oakland Athletics: 4	Pittsburgh Penguins: 5
	San Francisco 49ers: 5	Boston Red Sox: 4	

So, why the domination of the many by the few in the NBA? Obviously, acquiring good players and hiring good coaches is essential. Of the men selected as the 76 greatest players in the league's history, 47 or 62% were members of at least one of the five leading championship franchises and some still are. Even more impressive, of the 15 greatest head coaches chosen, along with two others who were placed on the top 10 list for the league's 50th anniversary but not kept for its 75th, 12 or 71% were employed by those clubs.

But the NFL, MLB, and NHL franchises in this study also had good players and good coaches and they did not dominate to the level that the NBA franchises did. True, the Yankees won 17 World Series titles and the Canadiens seized 18 Stanley Cups, but the NBA had two clubs—the Lakers and the Celtics—that each captured 17 championships.

Could the different playoff formats be the cause? Certainly the single-elimination system of the NFL has to be a factor for the league having the lowest percentage of franchise dominance. However, MLB, with exception of a 10-year experiment of one-

and-done wild card games, and the NHL are like the NBA in using a series system to determine their champions.

What then was the reason or reasons for the NBA franchises' success? Perhaps the nature of the sports is the answer. As Justin Turner of the Los Angeles Dodgers told Gabe Lacques of the *USA Today*:

You just can't compare baseball to basketball. Basketball, you get these super teams, you recruit three players and those three players can dominate games. You can have three or five of the best players here [meaning MLB], but still have to rely on the other 20 to do their part, or you're not going to win a lot of games.¹

Turner's point is well taken. NBA teams currently carry 15 players on their rosters during the regular season and postseason and dress 13 for games as opposed to 53 and 47 or 48 for the NFL; 26 from Opening Day through August 31, 28 from September 1 through the end of the regular season, and 26 during the postseason for MLB, all of whom can dress; and 23 and 20 for the NHL. By having to rely on less members, of whom only nine or 10 usually see playing time during a given game, NBA teams that can keep their three stars, surround them with several capable role players, and stay away from major injuries have a better chance of winning championships for an extended period than their football, baseball, and hockey equivalents.

In fact, as the next table indicates, the fewer the number of players each league permits its teams to have is inversely proportional to the franchise dominance percentage of that league.

League	Number of Players Permitted in 2022	Percentage of Championships by the Top Five Franchises
NBA	15, of which 13 are activated for games	68%
NHL	23, of which 20 are activated for games ²	59%
MLB	40, of which the following are activated for games: 26, Opening Day-August 31; 28, September 1-the end of the regular season; 26 for the postseason	49%
NFL	53, of which 47 or 48 are activated for games ³	39%

However, the above figures reflect just recent limits. What about the entire 75-year period? Well, those numbers vary depending on the season, but as the final table reveals, in all cases the order of dominance remains the same. And it probably always will.

League	Low to High Maximum Number of Players Activated Per Game	Percentage of Championships by the Top Five Franchises
NBA	10-15 ⁴	68%
NHL	14-20	59%
MLB	24-40 ⁵	49%
NFL	32-47/48	39%

¹Gabe Lacques, "Expanded Playoffs, Expanded Hopes," *USA Today*, June 24, 2022.

²Two players must be goaltenders. Shayne, "How Many Players Are on a NHL Team? (Explained)," <https://playedonice.com/nhl-roster-size/#> (accessed on November 7, 2022).

³Depending on whether the eighth offensive lineman option is used. "NFL Roster Limits," <https://www.profootballarchives.com/nflrosterlimits.html> (accessed on November 7, 2022).

⁴During the 1970-1971 season, expansion teams were permitted to dress 15 players until December 1, 1970, and 12 thereafter. Robert Bradley, "Roster Size," <https://www.apbr.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4383> (accessed on November 23, 2022), and "How Many Players Are on a Basketball Team?" <https://www.hoopsbeast.com/how-many-players-on-a-basketball-team/> (accessed on November 28, 2022).

⁵Numbers change at different times during the year. For details, see "MLB Roster History," https://www.baseball-almanac.com/articles/baseball_rosters.shtml (accessed on November 8, 2022), and "Major League Baseball Rosters," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_League_Baseball_rosters# (accessed on November 8, 2022).