

How the Lakers Sunk

Detailing the Lakers' two-year descent from NBA Champions to doomed franchise

Ryan Greenberg — June 6, 2022

On July 11, 2012, the Los Angeles Lakers acquired two-time MVP Steve Nash for four draft picks. Thirty days later, the Lakers traded for three-time Defensive Player of the Year and six-time All Star Dwight Howard. Mitch Kupchak, then-general manager of the Lakers, traded for the two of the game's biggest stars to team up with Kobe Bryant and Pau Gasol in an attempt to bring another championship to Los Angeles after a disappointing playoff loss the previous season.

Eight-and-a-half months later, the Lakers were swept out of the first round of the playoffs by the San Antonio Spurs. With such high expectations for the season, they failed to win a single playoff game. The Lakers struggled mightily. The injury bug bit particularly hard, but offensive struggles and chemistry issues led to locker room drama and a midseason coaching change. The Lakers finished 45-37, placing them as the seventh seed in the Western Conference.

They would then get swept by the Spurs and fail to make the playoffs for another seven years.

Nine years after the Lakers traded for Nash and Howard, the Lakers traded for Russell Westbrook last summer to play alongside LeBron James and Anthony Davis. The previous season saw the Lakers fall short to the Phoenix Suns in the first round of the playoffs, so Rob Pelinka, the Lakers' current general manager, traded for Westbrook to give the Lakers another star for a championship run.

On April 5, 2022, the Lakers lost to the Suns, assuring an eleventh-place finish in the Western Conference, meaning they would fail to qualify for the playoffs altogether. The Lakers finished 33-49. This was a team that was expected to compete for a championship this season, and instead finished as the eighth-worst team in the league, an unthinkable outcome.

Nine years after the disappointment of the 2012-13 Lakers, this season's Lakers introduced their fans to new levels of disappointment. Once again, the franchise faces a rebuild and another multi-year playoff drought.

After winning a championship only two seasons ago, how did the Lakers get here? Poor roster construction from the front office, a weak and ineffective coaching staff, and injury-prone players with incompatible playing styles have left the Lakers facing one of their most urgent rebuilds in the franchise's history.

OFFSEASON — Summer 2021

The Lakers finished the 2020-21 season at 42-30 and defeated the Golden State Warriors in the Play-In Tournament to finish as the seventh seed in the Western Conference. They were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs in six games to the Suns, a disappointing outcome to a season directly after winning a championship.

Rob Pelinka, alongside James, Davis, and head coach Frank Vogel, decided that the Lakers would need to acquire another star in order to return to their championship-winning ways. James was entering his age-37 season that summer, and Davis' injury history was an ever-growing concern. A star who could contribute alongside James and Davis, while also stepping up in their absence, was the missing piece.

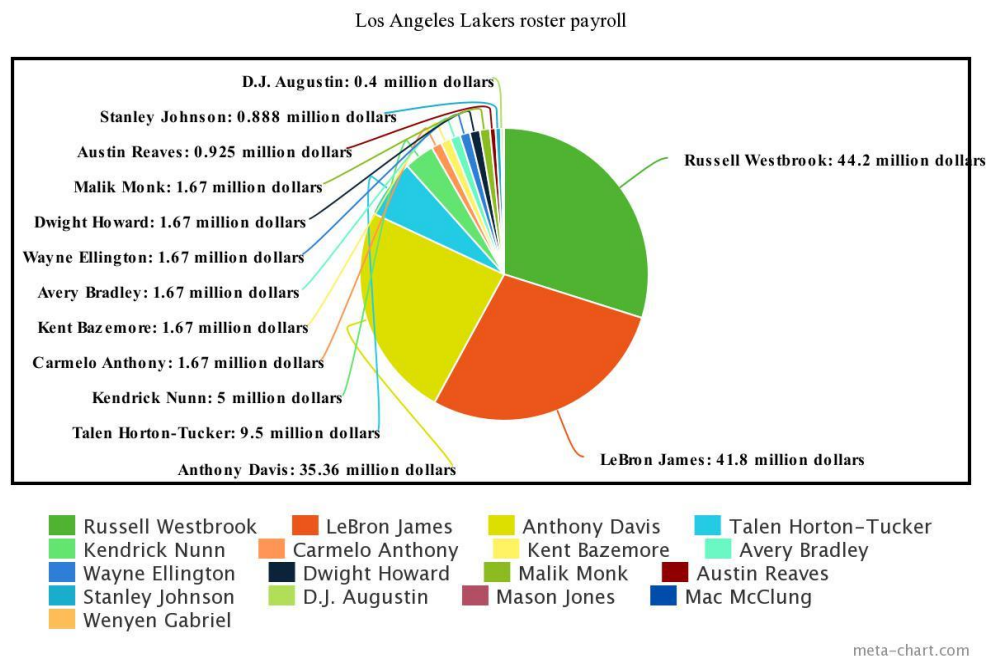
The Lakers chose Westbrook. On July 29, 2021, the Lakers acquired Westbrook from the Washington Wizards, sending away Kentavious Cadwell-Pope, Montrezl Harrell, Kyle Kuzma, and the draft rights to Isaiah Jackson. The trade immediately sparked concerns from NBA analysts and fans alike. Westbrook has been on a decline ever since his MVP season in 2016-17. Furthermore, Westbrook's style of basketball has proven to be very incompatible with his role on the Lakers. Westbrook is a player who needs the ball in his hands in order to be at his best. However, Westbrook is no longer good enough to be the leader of the Lakers' offense. Westbrook had to change his game severely this season in order to fit in with the Lakers, and struggled severely. [Basketball Reference](#) demonstrates that many of Westbrook's stats declined to career lows.

Professor Mark Orlando, the advisor of the Sports Management Certification Program at UC Santa Barbara, explained that the decision to acquire Westbrook was determined by reasons of image and personality, to both appease James and Davis, while also using his superstar name to promote the Lakers brand.

"The combination of styles of play won't work out," Orlando remarked. "They won't admit that to protect themselves and the Lakers brand."

Pelinka's decision to acquire Westbrook was not his only blunder in constructing the Lakers' roster this summer. After acquiring Westbrook, the Lakers committed \$120.75 million to only three players: James, Davis, and Westbrook. Of the \$147.5 million the Lakers spent on their end-of-the-season roster of seventeen players, 82% of that was spent on those three players, per [Spotrac](#). Fourteen of those Lakers were in their first season as a Laker. The Lakers only had three returning players this season, which is indicative of a team at the low-point of a rebuild, not a team with championship aspirations. Twelve of the Lakers at the end of this season were on

either minimum, rookie, or non-guaranteed contracts this season, which are usually given to players who fill out the last one or two spots of an NBA roster; not twelve. In total, the Lakers rostered 24 players this season, parting ways with seven players before the conclusion of the season.



Pelinka's construction of the Lakers' roster made it incredibly difficult to establish the winning chemistry needed to compete for a championship. 14 of the 17 players on the Lakers' end-of-season roster had never played together before. A [University of Maryland study](#) reported against this type of roster building: "We would encourage teams to lean towards maintaining the cores of their rosters and retooling as opposed to shipping off assets and entirely rebuilding."

Though the Lakers had championship aspirations this season, their roster construction suggests that perhaps a season this disappointing should have been expected.

FIRST HALF OF THE SEASON — October 19, 2021 – February 16, 2022

After being eliminated in the first round of the playoffs to the Suns in the previous season, Frank Vogel entered his third season as the head coach of the Lakers under the most scrutiny he had ever been in. In fact, Vogel had his fair share of doubters from day one.

Vogel was hired to replace Luke Walton in 2019 after Walton failed to make the playoffs in James' first season in Los Angeles. However, Vogel's tenure was met with skepticism before even his first game. Vogel was not the Lakers' first-choice head coach hire in 2019. Fans and the media alike questioned whether Vogel had a qualified enough resume to coach the Lakers

Critics voiced their concerns with Vogel immediately, but in his first season with the Lakers, he coached them to a championship, silencing his skeptics. However, those skeptics returned in Vogel's second season. After an underwhelming regular season led to a disappointingly early playoff exit, questions over Vogel's coaching began to rise. However, the Lakers' brass stood behind Vogel entering his third season.

The Lakers began their season as a disappointing but mediocre team. The team hovered at around .500 through New Year's, but in January, dipped below .500 and would never return.

Vogel's reputation as a coach qualified to lead the Lakers quickly unraveled. Although dealt a difficult hand, Vogel was unable to put together the pieces that made up the roster. At no point this season did the Lakers play like a team that could win a championship. The Lakers got beat on both sides of the floor all season as Vogel helplessly watched, unable to put an effective lineup on the floor.

Vogel's personality was also called into question throughout the season. Film shows Vogel remaining uninvolved in discussion during Lakers' timeouts. Additionally, Vogel often seemed reluctant to confront star players, and generally ineffective when he did. Critics began

arguing that Vogel did not have enough muster to manage stars like James, Davis, Westbrook, and their personalities.

It became clear to fans, analysts, and the media that Vogel lost the locker room.

SECOND HALF OF THE SEASON — February 25, 2022 – April 10, 2022

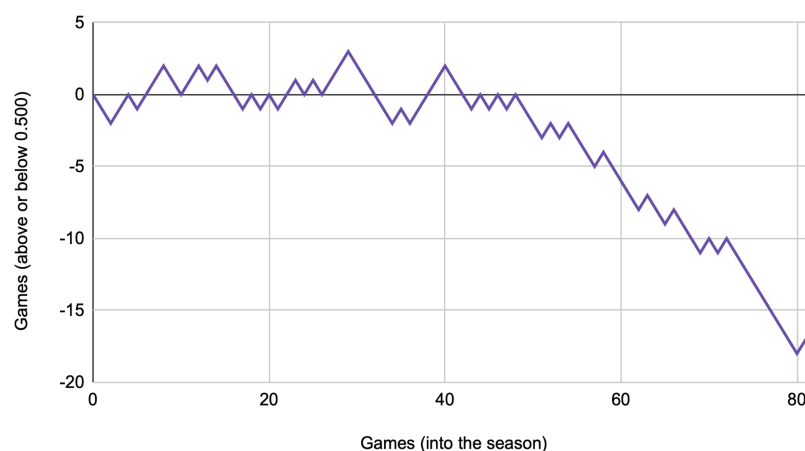
After the All Star break, the Lakers would have to improve to even have a semblance of a successful season. Their backs were to the wall; they would have to improve immediately, or it would be too-little-too-late. However, there was still an optimism that if the Lakers discovered themselves as a team and got into a rhythm to carry them to a playoff spot, they would be dangerous contenders come playoff time.

Injuries to the Lakers' two best players eviscerated what slim chance the Lakers had at achieving the season's goals. James only played 56 games, missing 26. More importantly, he missed eight of their last ten games with an ankle injury.

Even worse was Davis' injury record. Davis only played in 40 games, missing 42. Davis missed almost all of February and the entirety of March with a foot injury.

James, Davis, and Westbrook only played in 21 games together the entire season.

Los Angeles Lakers 21-22 Season



Lucas Watkins, a lifelong NBA fan and amateur podcaster, believes the Lakers' failure of a season is ultimately the responsibility of the players.

"I think they're all very much to blame, more to blame than anyone else, all three of them [James, Davis, and Westbrook]," Watkins remarked, pointing out mistakes that all three Lakers stars made this season that cost them a playoff spot. Watkins placed blame on James for urging Pelinka to acquire Westbrook; Davis for failing to take care of his health and avoid injuries at such a young age; and Westbrook for failing to adapt his playing style to succeed alongside James and Davis.

On April 5, 2022, the Lakers' loss to the Suns, coupled with the Spurs' win over the Denver Nuggets, mathematically assured the Lakers would not participate in this year's playoffs, or even the Play-In Tournament, with three games left to play. The Lakers went 6-18 after the All Star break, finishing 33-49, placing them at eleventh-place in the Western Conference. Throughout the season, the Lakers fielded 41 different starting lineups, due to injury and roster movement.

After the Lakers' final game, a win against the Nuggets, Frank Vogel was informed by a member of the media during the press conference that he had been fired.

Vogel responded, "I haven't been told shit."

A day later, the Lakers officially announced Vogel's firing. A shambolic ending to a shambolic season.

THE FUTURE OF THE LAKERS

The Lakers seem to be headed for more difficult seasons. They are stripped of draft capital, in large part due to trading for Davis and Westbrook, a decision that was risky at the time and now seem clearly ill-advised.

The Lakers' struggles will likely continue in the foreseeable future due to their lack of draft picks. The same [University of Maryland study](#) reported, "We suggest teams make a more careful evaluation of draft picks in trades." The Lakers do not have a single draft pick in this year's upcoming draft, and will lose one more first round pick to the New Orleans Pelicans in either 2024 or 2025, after already losing their first round pick in 2019 to the Pelicans, 2020 to the Oklahoma City Thunder, and 2021 to the Indiana Pacers, per [RealGM](#).

While championship-contending teams like the Golden State Warriors, Memphis Grizzlies, Boston Celtics, and Milwaukee Bucks all drafted their best players, the Lakers have no way to bring in young prospects that can develop into players capable of leading the franchise to a championship.

The Lakers are also in a similar conundrum with roster construction. Once again, they have a large portion of their roster budget tied up in three players. Westbrook is expected to pick up his player option next season, meaning he will be owed \$47 million, alongside Davis' \$38 million and James' \$44.5 million. The Lakers only have one more player under a guaranteed contract next season, with four more players on options for next season, per [Spotrac](#). In all likelihood, the Lakers will have only between four and eight players under contract for next season, leaving only between \$15 million and \$25 million to spend on their remaining seven to eleven roster spots. As it was the last two seasons, it will be difficult to assemble a

championship-contending roster next year when the Lakers' big three is making even more money, while also over half the team will be new players.

The Lakers will be challenged to build around anybody on their current roster. The only two players on the Lakers' roster who are good enough to build around are James and Davis. James, despite being one of the best basketball players of all time, turns 38 years old this December. He is simply too old to build around for the future. With how old James is getting, he does not have many more years left to spend in Los Angeles if they aren't going to compete for a championship. If the Lakers can't find ways to win next season, it is possible that James will be looking to continue his career elsewhere.

If it weren't for his injury history, Davis would be the ideal candidate to build around. He is in his prime and has proven he can be one of the best players on a championship-winning team. However, Davis has not played a full season since 2017-18, and has failed to play in at least 50% of games in each of the last two seasons. It will be difficult to commit to Davis when he can't be relied on to be the leader of a team for an entire season.

To improve before it's too late, the Lakers will have to start by trading away Westbrook. This will be difficult because they will get very little in return for Westbrook, as his contract makes him a negative asset. A team actually gets worse with Westbrook on their roster, if it means they lose the almost \$50 million they have to spend on him. Finding a trade partner for Westbrook will be very difficult, and the Lakers will likely have to include better draft picks with Westbrook, and receive worse draft picks in return, in order to move on from Westbrook. However, the Lakers are already short on draft capital. It will be really painful to lose even more draft capital in order to get rid of a player.

After moving on from Westbrook, the Lakers will have to strongly consider the futures of both Davis and James. A reality where James is not useful to the Lakers is not inconceivable. While James is worth holding onto going into next season, his trade value will be worth exploring if the Lakers struggle again next season. James is a free agent in a year's time, and if the Lakers can't compete for a championship next season, they will have to trade James or lose him for free. Davis' health will be the determining factor in his future with the Lakers. The Lakers cannot afford to lose another season of Davis to injury. If he can remain healthy and help the team accomplish its goals next season, the Lakers will want to build around Davis and use all the money that will be freed up by the potential departures of James and Westbrook in a year to surround him with teammates capable of winning a championship with Davis. However, if Davis cannot stay healthy, the Lakers will consider tearing it all down, recuperating some of that lost draft capital, and starting from scratch.

One does not need to look much further than the [University of Maryland study](#) to understand why the Lakers struggled this season. In fact, the Lakers failed to adhere to any of the suggestions the researchers note in their conclusion. The researchers prioritize spacing, perimeter defense, roster continuity, draft pick value, and pursuing defensively-strong free agents. The Lakers did not follow any of the principles outlined by the researchers.

Trading away star players is not in the DNA of the Lakers. However, neither is losing. The Lakers will have to navigate uncharted territory in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes of the previous decade.