

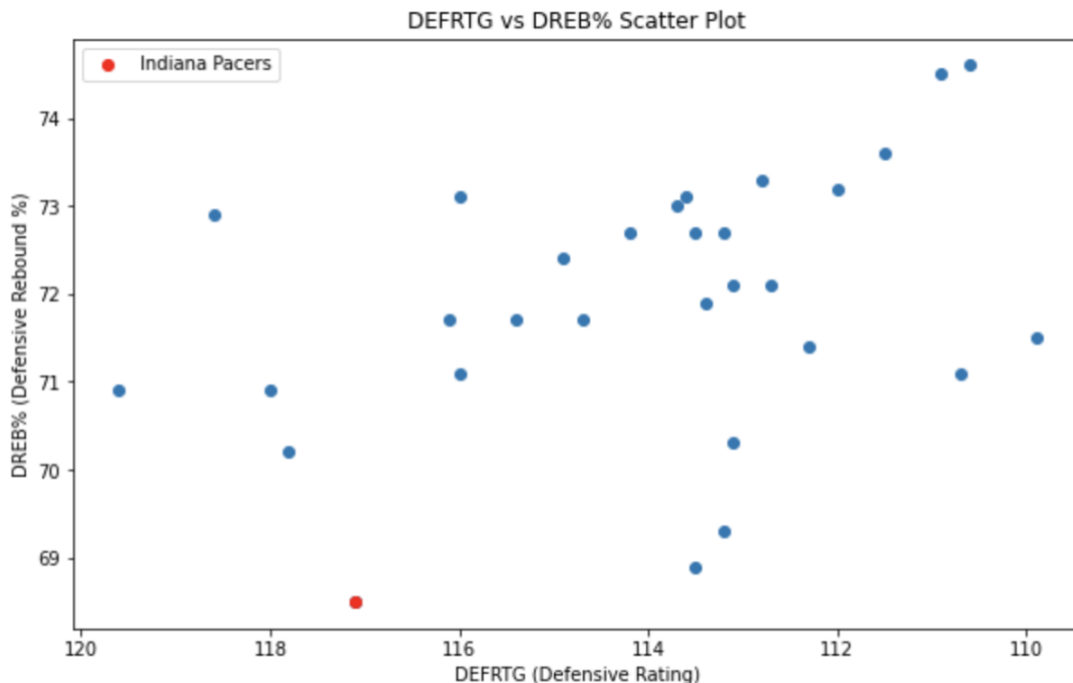
An Analytically Driven Free Agency for the Indiana Pacers

The Pacers are a fun team to look at, as one of the few with cap space entering the summer of 2023. I first took a detailed look through the Pacers' salary cap situation this summer. After adding all the salaries of active players on the roster, as well as dead money payments, the total amount paid ends up being \$95,452,115. For the sake of this exercise, it is necessary that I make a few preliminary decisions. I decided to make 3 free agent signings, and unrestricted free agents James Johnson, Oshae Brissett, and George Hill will be included in the free agent pool, and not assumed to resign. I will also assume that two-way players Kendall Brown and Trevelin Queen are extended qualifying offers. After accounting for all of that, the Pacers' payroll lands at \$99,216,812. This gives the Pacers' plenty of room to work with this offseason.

My approach to this off-season had two major components:

- 1) Improve and build on the areas of strength that the Pacers displayed this season with their current roster
- 2) Address the areas of weakness that are necessary to elevate this team to a playoff contender.

With respect to weaknesses, as of today, when observing the entirety of the 2022/23 season, the Pacers are 26th in Defensive Rating, and rebounding is additionally a huge problem. The Pacers are 29th in opponents average second change points, and 30th,



dead last, in defensive rebound percentage. With respect to building on strengths, Tyrese Haliburton is the centerpiece of this young team, and it's important to build off how he thrives. With Haliburton, the Pacers play quite fast, with the 9th fastest pace in the league this season). Additionally, the Pacers have the most transition possessions

in the league and score the 3rd highest points per possession in transition in the league. It is advisable that Haliburton plays fast, as he's quite good at it, scoring 1.34 points per possession on transition plays this season, which puts him at the 85.6th percentile of the league. Therefore, it's going to be important that the players signed are effective in transition. I also decided to look through all the teams in the past 5 years that were top 10 in pace and find commonalities amongst the ones that were successful. There were 10 teams in the past 5 years that were in the top 10 in pace and made it to the second round of the playoffs:

21-22 Milwaukee Bucks (3rd)

21-22 Memphis Grizzlies (4th)

21-22 Phoenix Suns (8th)

20-21 Milwaukee Bucks (2nd)

19-20 Milwaukee Bucks (1st)

19-20 Houston Rockets (2nd)

19-20 LA Clippers (8th)

18-19 Milwaukee Bucks (5th)

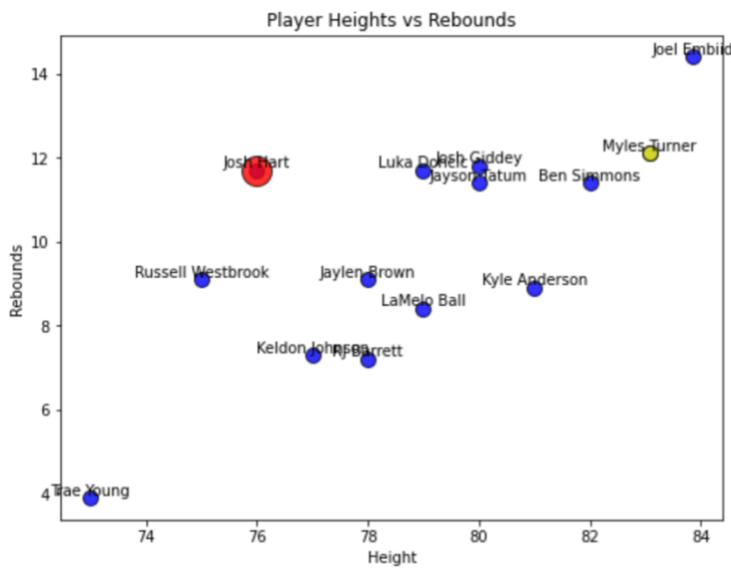
18-19 Philadelphia 76ers (8th)

18-19 Golden State Warriors (10th)

I'll also include the 22-23 Bucks and Grizzlies in this list, as top seeded teams that are also top 10 in pace this season (obviously the playoffs haven't happened yet, but it's a safe bet that they'll at least be competitive).

Every one of these teams was additionally in the top 10 in the league in rebound %, except for the 21-22 Suns who were still in the top half of the league, and the 19-20 small-ball Rockets. For teams that want to get out in the fast break, it is integral that they are securing rebounds so they can push the pace and play against defenses that aren't set. These rebounding woes will have to be addressed in the off-season. Also, I included players in the free-agent pool that I deemed to be likely to decline their player option.

Josh Hart



The Pacers like to play small, and Myles Turner isn't a top tier rebounder amongst Centers (99th in the NBA in rebounds per 100 possessions amongst players who played at least 30 games per NBA.com), so it is integral that the Pacers have adept rebounders at

the other positions. Unrestricted Free Agent Josh Hart would be an excellent fit in Indiana. Among guards that played at least 30 games this season, Hart ranks 3rd in rebounds per 100 possessions at 11.6, only trailing Luka Dončić and Josh Giddey. 7.8 rebounds per game at 6'5 is unparalleled. The Pacers want to play fast, and Josh Hart is excellent in transition, scoring 1.27 points per possession since he's been in New York, putting him at the 78.3rd percentile in the league. He has proven he can play at forward in New York; playing his best minutes in lineups featuring two other guards. Even on a team like New York that likes to play big, the Hart lineup with the best net rating amongst lineups that played at least 50 minutes together featured both Brunson and Quickley. The Pacers also like to shoot a lot of 3's, the 6th most in the league this season, and Hart has been excellent from 3, shooting 55.8% on 2.26 attempts per game. With better spacing and more opportunities in Indiana, Hart would thrive. He'll have no problem slotting in with any combination of Haliburton, Nembhard, Hield, or Mathurin, as he doesn't need the ball in his hands to thrive, proven by him having the lowest usage % amongst non-centers in New York, despite his production. He is fully comfortable operating in an offensive scheme such as the Pacers' that is dependent on sharing the ball; the Pacers and Knicks are respectively 2nd and 3rd in total passes per game. He currently makes \$12,960,000, and anywhere in the 12–15- million-dollar range would be easily affordable this off-season.

Kyle Kuzma

Kyle Kuzma has a player option for next season, but after an impressive 2 year run with Washington, it is a near certainty that he declines his player option and becomes an unrestricted free agent this summer. Immediately, 21 points and 7 rebounds a game is a big upgrade over Nesmith, essentially doubling his numbers. There are far more nuanced ways that his effect will be felt in Indiana. His size and length would be paramount in adding versatility to Indiana's defense, currently sitting at 26th in defensive rating. It can be difficult to quantify defensive impact, but amongst all forwards that

played 50 games this season, Kuzma ranks 15th in defensive rebounds per 100 possessions and 20th in total defensive win shares. We can also see Kuzma's defensive impact in Washington's lineup data. When looking at lineups that played at least 50 minutes together, the top 3 defensive ratings for Washington all featured Kuzma, showcasing his importance to Washington on defense. There's nobody else in the free agent market that offers the same level of defense, rebounding, and scoring output as Kuzma at his size, all of which would be of great benefit to Indiana. His 3-point percentage was lower this year than the past 2 years, but with better spacing, tempo, and movement offensively in Indiana, compared to Washington's 23rd ranked pace and bottom half of the league assist %, I'd expect his shooting to improve back to where he was. This kind of jump has precedent; Buddy Hield went from 36% to 42% from the 3-point line between last season on the Kings and this season getting fully acclimated in Indiana. I'd expect him to make something near Mikal Bridges' contract, in the 20-25-million-dollar range.

Bruce Brown

I've planned on paying around 40 million dollars already this off-season, and addressed many of my concerns related to defense, rebounding, and building on the offense. My third signing, Bruce Brown, will bolster the bench unit and add to the positional versatility I've already included. As another player that will likely decline their player option, Brown has had a fantastic year in the movement heavy Denver offense, shooting 3 times as many 3's per game as he ever has at a very respectable 37%. He's another example of a high-level positional rebounder, and he has plenty of experience playing a variety of positions, including Brooklyn's 2021 Eastern Conference Semifinals Run, where Brown started and closed multiple games at the center position. He's a fantastic transition player, even better than Hart, scoring 1.32 points per possession, putting him in the 83.2nd percentile. His transition scoring would only be bolstered by Indiana's stellar transition attack. The biggest piece of evidence of Bruce Brown's impact is in the Nuggets' lineup data. For a Nuggets team that is known for its starting lineup, their top 4 highest net rating lineups that have played more than 50 minutes together all include Bruce Brown, 2 of which don't even include Jamal Murray, who many consider to be their 2nd best player. His POA defense and talent as a connector may not glare in the traditional stats, but his lineup data shows that his impact is pivotal to Denver's success, a team that is firmly the number 1 seed in the West. At somewhere in the 10-15-million-dollar range, the Pacers could outbid the already capped Nuggets. Bruce Brown would be a valuable, versatile, relatively cheap acquisition that would only be additive.

My off-season plan would cost somewhere between 35 and 55 million dollars. With the cap space I described earlier, this plan would keep the Pacers safely below the luxury tax threshold, while adding incredibly valuable pieces that address shortcomings, as well as build on the versatility, movement, and athleticism that Pacers already have.

- All lineup data is taken from NBA.com and Basketball Reference. All salary information is taken from Spotrac

