

The NBA's 'Perfect Game' by One of Basketball's Rising Superstars

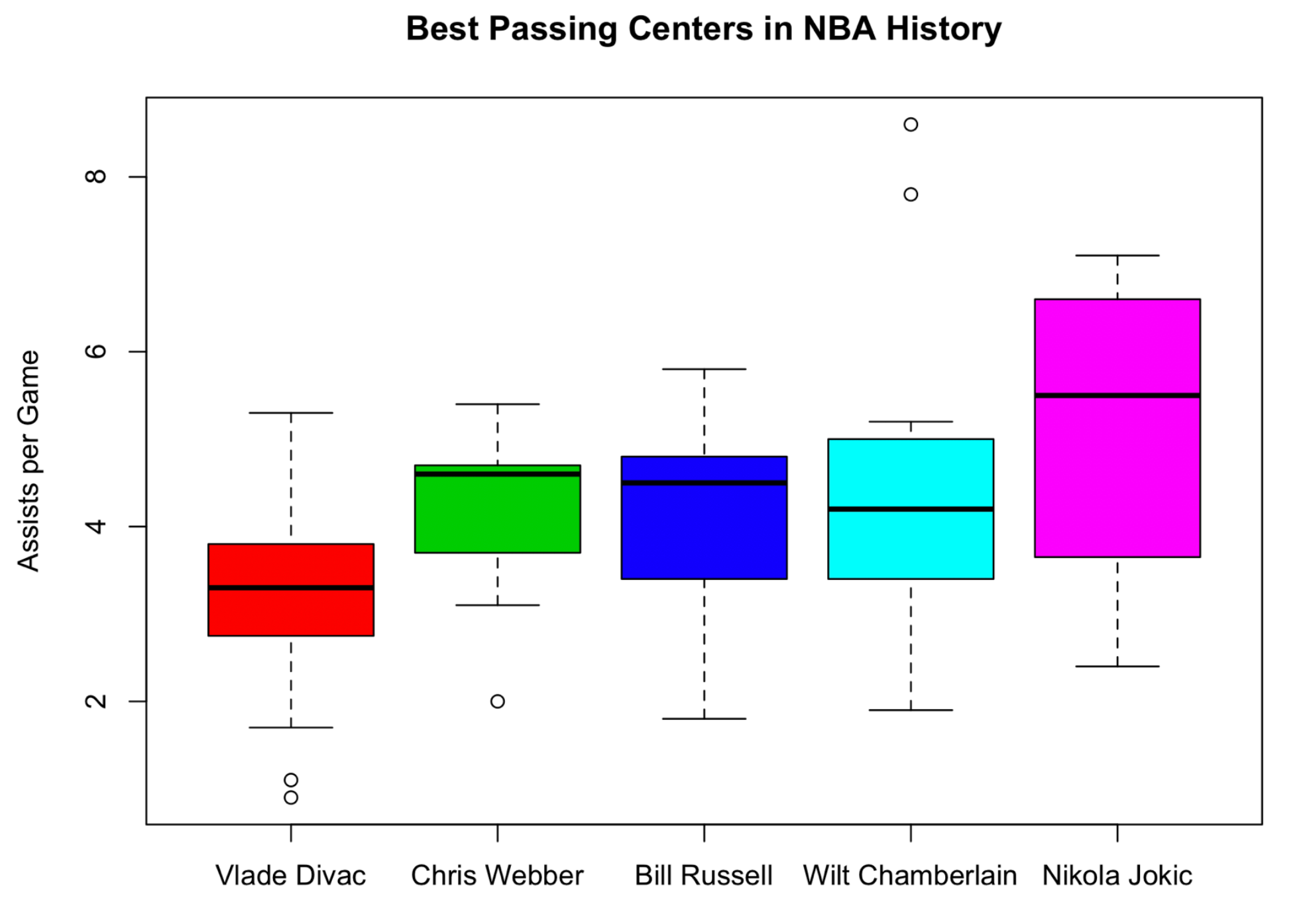
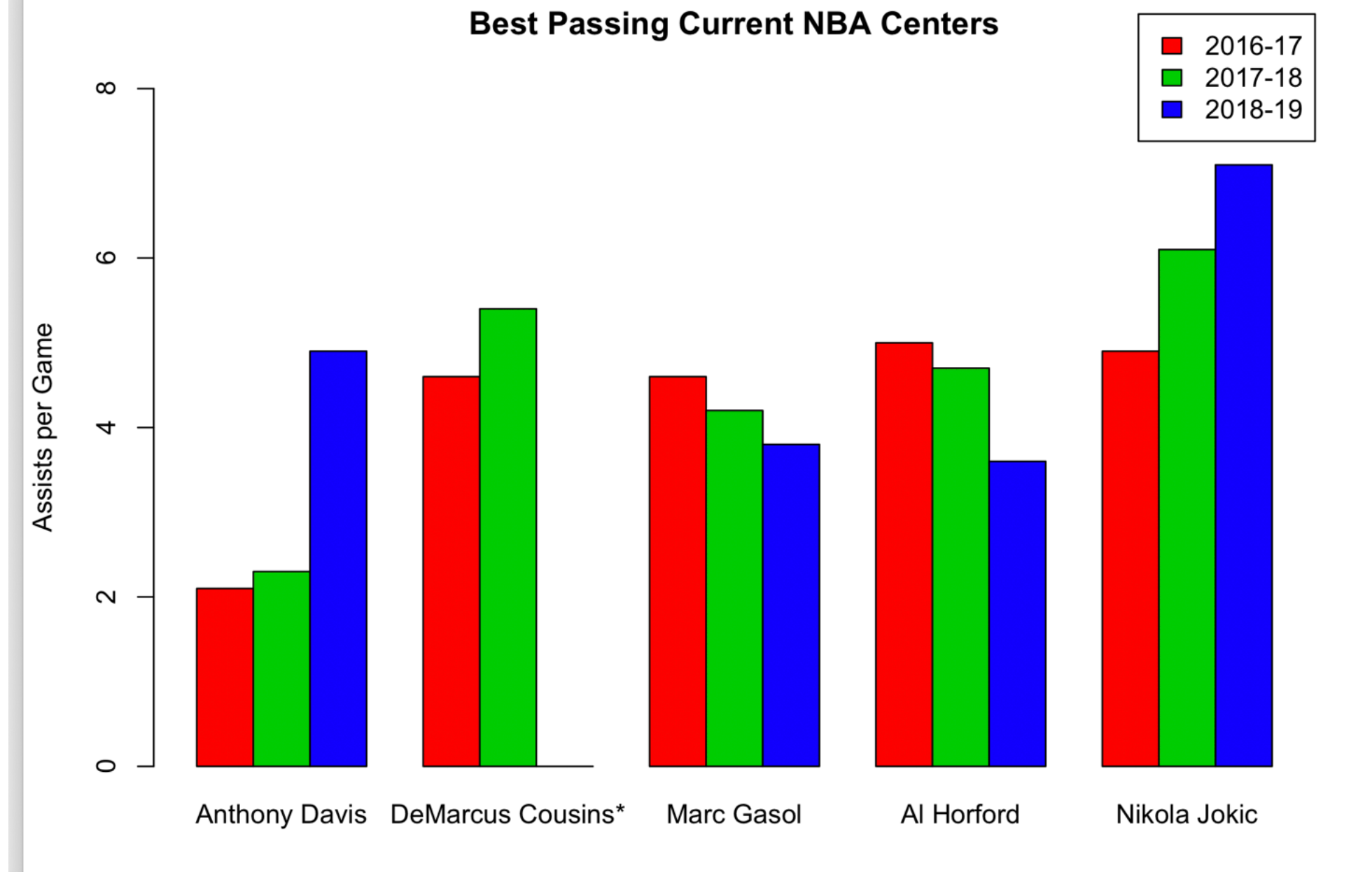
By [Chad Shimozaki](#) • 24 Nov 2018 • 5 min read

In baseball, a "perfect game" is achieved when a pitcher does not allow an opposing player to reach base - 27 up, 27 down. While basketball does not have an easily recognizable equivalent, NBA fans were treated to a perfect game this season on [Oct. 20](#). In an easily overlooked rout of the Phoenix Suns, [Nikola Jokic](#) recorded a 31-point triple-double with no turnovers while shooting perfect from the field (11-11), joining [Wilt Chamberlain](#) as one of the only two players to ever achieve such a feat, according to a tweet from [@ESPNStatsInfo](#).

Jokic and the Denver Nuggets surpassed expectations from the onset, boasting a 9-1 record and the second seed in the Western Conference in early November. Since then, the Nuggets have lost six of their last nine games due to poor three-point shooting and inconsistent defense. Fortunately, [Juancho Hernangomez](#) and [Monte Morris](#) have emerged as key rotation players around the young core of [Jamal Murray](#), [Gary Harris](#), and Jokic (21, 24, and 23 years old, respectively).

Despite recent struggles, the Nuggets are still a solid playoff lock in the West and possess one of the best young cores looking forward for the next few years. The Nuggets had the [youngest team in the league at the beginning of the 2018-2019 season](#) with an average age of 24.72, per Hero Sports. Additionally, the Nuggets have the fourth best point differential in the league, are one of only three teams with a top-ten offensive and defensive efficiency (along with the Raptors and Bucks), and are led by Jokic, a soon to be all-star.

Jokic is a generational talent, emerging as the undisputed best passing center in the current NBA, and is making a legitimate case to be the best passing center in NBA history. His average assists per game have increased every season: 4.9 in 2016-17, 6.1 in 2017-18, and 7.3 to date this year.



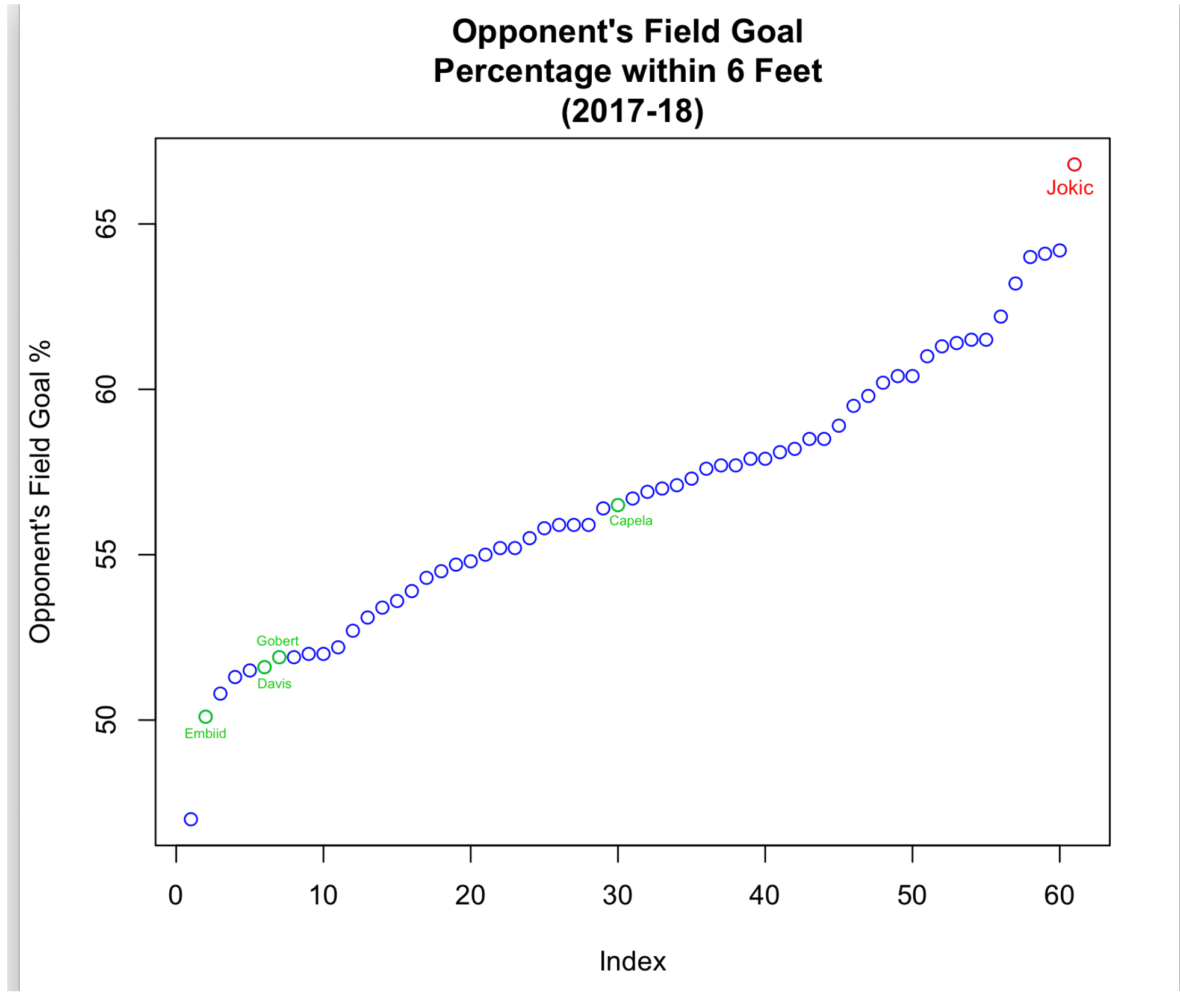
Jokic has also increased his assist percentage (the percentage of his teammates' field goals assisted on) from 29.6% last season to 36.6% this season, within a couple percentage points of point guards universally known for their passing abilities, like [Ben Simmons](#) and [Chris Paul](#), per Basketball Reference. Jokic already has the second most games of any center with at least 10 assists, trailing only Wilt Chamberlain (a player being mentioned with Wilt this often is astounding).

Here is a video of one of his mind-boggling passes:



Many players will fake shot attempts and sling the ball to their teammates once the defense assumes the ball is going up, but nobody else actually completes their shooting motion, lofting the ball to their teammate. This move takes equal parts basketball intelligence, as well as guts, to attempt in an NBA game.

While Jokic is the lynchpin in the Nuggets offense, his defensive woes have been well documented. Jokic was dead last among centers (who played at least 65 games) during the 2017-2018 season when he was the closest defender to opponents shooting inside of 6 feet, per NBA.com.

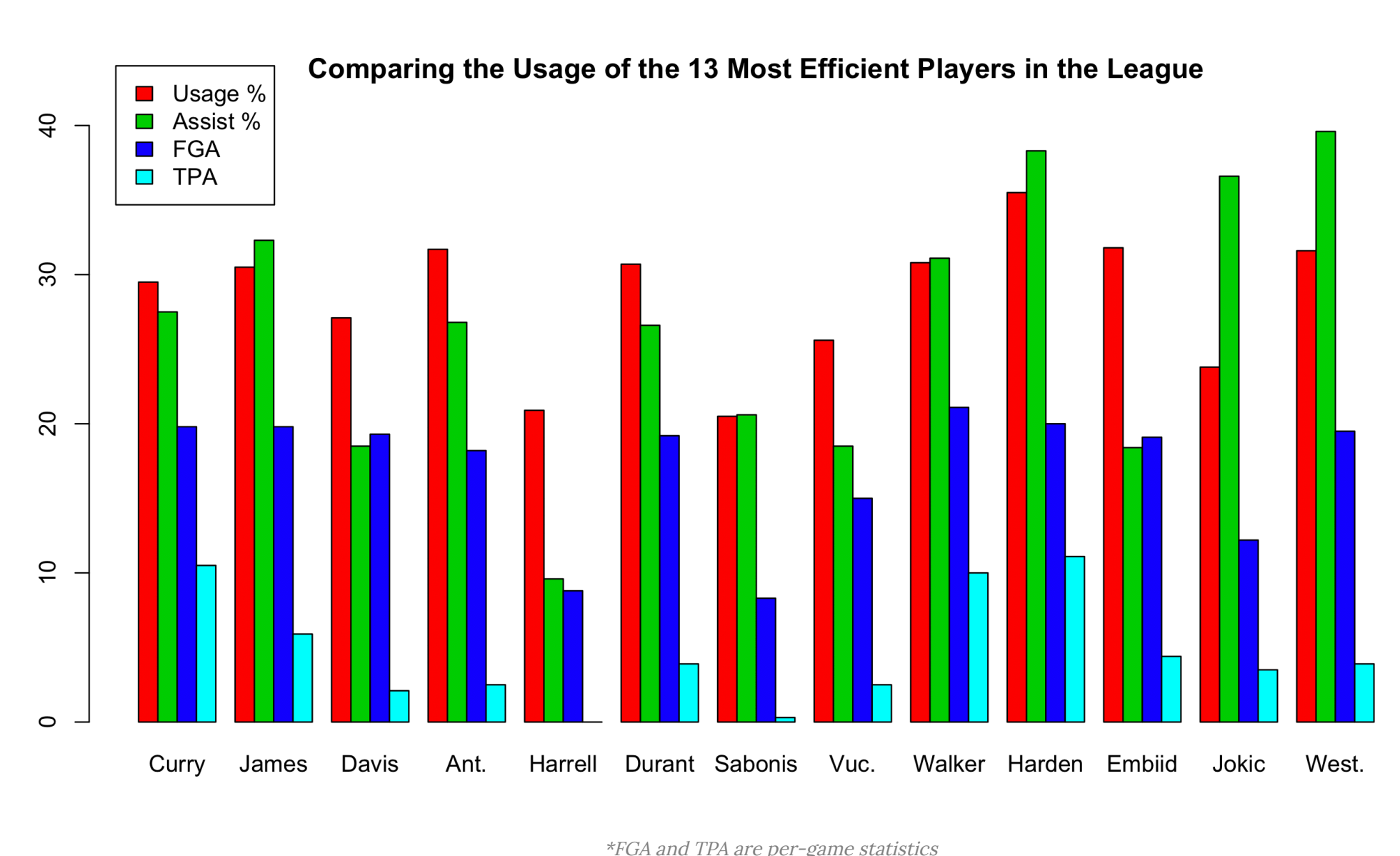


However, Jokic has displayed major improvements on defense this season, as opponents are only shooting 61.3% inside of 6 feet with Jokic as the closest defender, opposed to 66.8% last season. Jokic has an above average defensive efficiency rating compared to other centers this season and the Nuggets currently have the fifth best defensive efficiency rating in the league.



In one play, Jokic successfully closes out on [Brook Lopez](#), traps Bledsoe after a pick-and-roll, recovers to [Ilyasova](#) after Hernangomez helps on Lopez, then steps in front of [Khris Middleton](#), forcing an errant pass, and an eventual shot clock violation. Jokic is showing more active hands and quicker feet than in years past where he would lazily reach and the opposing team would be rewarded with an easy layup.

Another major knock on Nikola Jokic's game is that he will sometimes pass too much instead of shooting the ball. He is incredibly efficient from the field, having shot 49.9% from the field, 39.6% on threes, and 85% on free throws last season. According to ESPN, Jokic is the 12th most efficient player in the league this season by PER (a measure of a player's efficiency), but only has the 45th highest usage rate and attempted the 69th most shots.



Of the 13 most efficient players in the league this season, Jokic has the third lowest usage rate (the estimated number of a team's possessions used by a player) and takes the third least shot attempts (the two players below him, Harrell and Sabonis, are not the fulcrums of their offenses and take 100% and 96.4% of their shots from inside the three-point line, respectively). Jokic has taken less than 10 shots in a game on six different occasions this year, including a game in which he took only one shot and the Nuggets lost. Jokic takes pride in getting his teammates easier baskets and he is good enough to make an impact on the game without scoring. But if the Nuggets want to make the playoffs (and win a playoff series), Jokic must shoot more.

On July 1, the Nuggets gave their young superstar a five-year, \$147 million contract. Jokic responded by improving his defense and continuing to make the case to become the greatest passing center in NBA history. Jokic does not need to be "perfect" in every game, but shooting more will only benefit Jokic and his teammates on offense. Barring injury, Nikola Jokic will be playing in his first All-Star game this season in Charlotte, N.C., and will lead the Denver Nuggets to the playoffs for the first time since 2013.

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