SPORTS

BASKETBALL

Johnson honored as NBA's Sixth Man of the Year

Olympic gold medalist adds John Havlicek Trophy to collection

Keldon Johnson was the ultimate backup for the San Antonio Spurs this season.

He played in all 82 games, all off the bench, becoming only the second NBA player in the last decade to do that. He became the first Spurs player to score 1,000 points as a reserve in a season. And all year long, San Antonio touted him as the best backup in the league.

Voters agreed — and the Spurs have another award winner.

Johnson was announced Wednesday as the NBA's Sixth Man of the Year, joining Manu Ginobili in 2008 as the only other Spurs player to win the award.

It's a first individual NBA award for Johnson, who was part of the US Olympic team that won gold at the Tokyo Games in 2021.

"I started for a long time," Johnson said on ESPN after he was revealed as the winner. "Now, it's my time to come off the bench. I just continue to analyze the game, come off the bench, go in there and just do my thing."

Jaime Jaquez Jr of the Miami Heat finished second in the voting, and Tim Hardaway Jr of the Denver Nuggets was third. Jaquez led all NBA reserves in scoring and double-digit games, while Hardaway led reserves with 205 3-pointers and was fourth in the league in scoring off the bench.

Hardaway and Jaquez tied for ninth in 2024. Hardaway was also fifth in 2021, 10th in 2017 and tied for 13th as a rookie in 2014.

It was the culmination of a two-year run like few others for Johnson, who has appeared in 159 games over the past two seasons — always coming off the bench. No other player in the NBA has played anywhere near that many games without a start in that span.

"I wanted to be part of something special here in San Antonio," Johnson said. "I knew that, in order for me to really be the best for our team, coming off the bench was probably my best possibility. At first, it was tough. I had to (control) my ego and put the team first. After that, the sky was the limit."

It was the third award the NBA has handed out this postseason, the second won by the Spurs and the first with any real intrigue about who was going to win.

On Monday, San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama became the first unanimous selection as Defensive Player of the Year. And on Tuesday, reigning MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander of Oklahoma City was named the Clutch Player of the Year — getting 96 of the 100 possible first-place votes.

In the Sixth Man balloting, Johnson got 63 first-place votes, while Jaquez got 34. Hardaway was followed by Minnesota's Naz Reid (the 2024 winner who got one first-place vote this year) in fourth, Oklahoma City's Ajay Mitchell in fifth, Houston's Reed Sheppard in sixth, Detroit's Isaiah Stewart (one first-place vote) in seventh, New York's Mitchell Robinson (one first-place vote) in eighth, Minnesota's Ayo Dosunmu in ninth, Toronto's Sandro Mamukelashvili in 10th, San Antonio's Dylan Harper in 11th and Toronto's Jamal Shead in 12th.

"It's a little emotional," Johnson said. "It's a big accomplishment. A lot of hard work goes into an award like this."

The league's Sportsmanship Award winner will be announced Thursday, with one player from each division — Miami's Bam Adebayo (Southeast), San Antonio's Harrison Barnes (Southwest), Gilgeous-Alexander (Northwest), Golden State's Al Horford (Pacific), Indiana's T.J. McConnell (Central) and Boston's Derrick White (Atlantic) — selected as the finalists.

That award is voted on by players, not the media panel that decides most winners.

The Most Improved Player award — either Nickeil Alexander-Walker of Atlanta, Deni Avdija of Portland or Jalen Duren of Detroit — will be revealed Friday.

Other awards that are coming, but have not had their announcement dates revealed, are Coach of the Year (Detroit's J.B. Bickerstaff, San Antonio's Mitch Johnson or Boston's Joe Mazzulla), Rookie of the Year (Philadelphia's VJ Edgecombe, Dallas' Cooper Flagg or Charlotte's Kon Knueppel) and MVP (Gilgeous-Alexander, Wembanyama or Denver's Nikola Jokic).

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA



San Antonio Spurs swingman Keldon Johnson has been voted NBA's Sixth Man of the Year by a 100-member global media panel. The seven-year veteran earned the John Havlicek Trophy for delivering 13.2 points and 5.4 rebounds per game while shooting 51.9 percent from the field and 36.3 percent from 3-point range. AFP

SGA's 37 helps the Thunder overshadow Suns to go 2-0 up

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 37 points and nine assists, as the Oklahoma City Thunder defeated the Phoenix Suns 120-107 on Wednesday night to take a 2-0 lead in their first-round Western Conference playoff series.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 25 points in the series-opening win on Sunday, going five for 18 from the field. He bounced back in Game 2 with 13-for-25 shooting after being presented the NBA Clutch Player of the Year trophy before the game.

Chet Holmgren and Jalen Williams each added 19 points for Oklahoma City, though Williams left the game in the third quarter with a left hamstring injury and did not return. Williams, an All-Star in 2024-25, missed 30 games this season with a right hamstring injury after missing the first 19 games of the season following surgery on his right wrist.

Five higher-seeded teams had lost home games in the first week of the playoffs before Wednesday, including the top three seeds in the Eastern Conference — Detroit, Boston and New York — and the No 2 and 3 seeds in the West — San Antonio and Denver. Oklahoma City avoided that fate by shooting 47.3 percent from the field and forcing 21 turnovers.

Dillon Brooks led the Suns with 30 points before fouling out in the fourth quarter. Devin Booker scored 22 points and Jalen Green added 21 for Phoenix, which will host Game 3 on Saturday.

The Thunder led 65-57 at halftime. Williams made his first six field goals and had 19 points at the break, while Gilgeous-Alexander had 17 points on 7-for-13 shooting.

The action picked up early in the second half, as Brooks and Oklahoma City's Luguentz Dort — both members of Canada's national team — got double technical fouls after a brief skirmish following a made free throw.

Holmgren started the second half hot. He scored eight points in just over four minutes to help the Thunder go up 77-63 and force a Phoenix timeout. Oklahoma City extended the lead to 100-77 at the end of the third quarter.



Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander drives past Phoenix Suns guard Jalen Green during Game 2 of a first-round NBA playoffs series on Wednesday. AP

Oklahoma City pushed the lead to 26 points early in the fourth, before Phoenix made a final push.

Booker made a pull-up jumper and was fouled. He missed the free throw, but he rebounded and made a midrange jumper to cut Oklahoma City's lead to 110-97 with five minutes to play.

The Suns got no closer than 10 points.

Meanwhile, the Detroit Pistons used dominant defense and a third-quarter scoring spree to beat the Orlando Magic 98-83 on Wednesday and level their NBA Eastern Conference playoff series at one game apiece.

Cade Cunningham scored 27 points and handed out 11 assists, while Tobias Harris added 16 points and 11 rebounds, for the Eastern Conference top-seeded Detroit, which was stunned in Game 1 of the best-of-seven series on Sunday.

"We just played defense," Pistons coach J.B. Bickerstaff said. "It's that simple. When we play defense at the level we're capable of, it triggers everything for us."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

ASICS accelerates push in China's running market at record speed

By YUAN SHENGGAO



At the 2026 Chengdu World Heritage Marathon in March, Koji Hayashi, chairman of ASICS China, crossed the finish line with a personal best half-marathon time of one hour and 58 minutes at the age of 54.

The executive, who took up running just two years ago and has since lost 15 kilograms, embodies the brand's core philosophy of "Sound Mind, Sound Body". His unwavering commitment to running mirrors ASICS' strategy to deepen its presence in China and strive for industry leadership.

A Japanese professional sportswear brand with a 77-year heritage, ASICS leads the global market with its sports science expertise and comprehensive product portfolio, said the group.

According to the group's consolidated financial results for the fiscal year 2025, it posted net sales of 810.9 billion yen ($5.1 billion), up 19.5 percent year-on-year, and operating profit of 142.5 billion yen, a 42.4 percent year-on-year increase. Both revenue and profit hit record highs, marking five consecutive years of growth.

In this report, China stands out as a key driver of the group's success. In the fiscal year 2025, ASICS Greater China achieved a 20.4 percent year-on-year rise in net sales on a currency-neutral basis and a 29.8 percent year-on-year increase in operating profit, with an operating margin of 20.8 percent.

Hayashi said: "In terms of revenue, China business represents around 15 percent, while in terms of profit, it is close to 20 percent, which reflects the strong profitability and strategic importance of the Chinese market in our group."

Discussing the growth strategy for the Chinese market, Hayashi emphasized the importance of focusing on specific categories. Among the group's five core business segments — Performance Running, or P.RUN, Sportstyle, Core Performance Sports, Apparel and Onitsuka Tiger — P.RUN and Onitsuka Tiger are driving global growth. In the fiscal year 2025, global P.RUN net sales reached 363.5 billion yen, up 11.2 percent year-on-year with a 23.7 percent profit margin. Meanwhile, Onitsuka Tiger saw a 43 percent year-on-year net sales surge and a 37.7 percent profit margin, fueled by its premium positioning and inbound tourism demand.

> "We are deepening on our commitment to the China market, with plans to ramp up how we engage with both everyday consumers and the running community..."
>
> **Koji Hayashi**, chairman of ASICS China

"ASICS is focusing on running shoes in the Chinese market. I believe that focus is one of the key reasons behind our strong performance," Hayashi said, highlighting the brand's core differentiator in China.

Long-term scientific research and innovation investment forms ASICS' irreplaceable product advantage. From the Metaspeed Ray, a top-tier racing shoe weighing only 129 grams, to a full product matrix covering stability, cushion, bounce and speed, the brand caters to the increasingly professional demands of Chinese runners based on sports science.

Meanwhile, as Hayashi noted, Chinese runners' growing professionalism has driven recognition of the ASICS' shoe rotation concept. Notably, the brand's professional running shoe matrix has further attracted consumer attention and fostered deeper engagement, serving as a vital bridge that connects its product strength to the robust growth of the OneASICS membership system in China, which surged 27 percent year-on-year alongside the expansion of its community ecosystem.



Runners take part in the Yangzhou half marathon held in late March, an event supported by ASICS.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



ASICS offers on-site services at the Yangzhou half marathon finish area.

The high growth rate, profitability and quality user base of the Chinese market underscore its strategic value, making increased investment an important priority for the group.

"We are deepening on our commitment to the China market, with plans to ramp up how we engage with both everyday consumers and the running community, and to expand our retail footprint," Hayashi said.

Building on ASICS' deep-rooted professional running heritage and its long-standing strength in sports science innovation, Hayashi outlined a five-year road map with the core goal of strengthening the leadership in China's running category. "In the marathon running, our ambition is to become the leading brand in terms of the wearing rate in this market. That is a goal we are actively pursuing, and we hope to substantially grow in some point time in the five years." He also revealed that given the continuous expansion of running enthusiasts and ample market space in China's sports market, the brand plans to double the number of its current retail presence in China over the next five years, with a focus on flagship stores in key cities.

The brand will also strengthen digital channels including Tmall, JD and RedNote to engage consumers via an omnichannel model, with the goal of boosting brand exposure, reaching more running enthusiasts and deepening consumer connections — all aligned with its long-term vision. "In the future, I hope that when people think about running, ASICS will naturally come to mind as a trusted brand. That is the kind of connection we want to build," said Hayashi.

Localized innovation and an ecosystem-wide strategy are pivotal to ASICS' roots in China. The brand has established a China Production Center in Shanghai and launched the Tech Plus local apparel collection tailored to domestic needs. It is also partnered with races such as the Yangzhou half marathon and Chengdu World Heritage Marathon to build a mass running ecosystem across the country.

Beyond commercial growth, ASICS positions itself as a long-term contributor to China's sports development. As an official sponsor of the 2027 World Athletics Championships in Beijing, ASICS is stepping up its support for athletes in China. The brand also plans to launch a professional training base, empowering Chinese athletes and long-term talent cultivation with the brand's sports science expertise. In the realm of youth sports, the group promotes talent development through various strategies, including collaborations with institutions to establish funds like the Samaranch·ASICS Xiangyang Fund, as well as organizing self-operated IP events such as the ASICS Junior Tennis Tour.

"We have decided to invest more, not only by selling goods, but also by supporting athletes and offering more value-added services," Hayashi said, adding that the brand's value lies in advancing both public fitness and competitive sports in China, all in practice of ASICS' core philosophy of "Sound Mind, Sound Body".

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