

NBA Finals: Thunder vs. Pacers

Sunday, June 8, 2025

Chuck Daly Lifetime Achievement Award

Don Nelson

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the 2025 Chuck Daly Lifetime Achievement Award press conference. At this time, I'd like to turn it over to the executive director of the NBA Coaches Association, David Fogel.

DAVID FOGEL: Thank you, Mark. We are excited to be here at the NBA Finals and to present the Chuck Daly Lifetime Achievement Award.

On behalf of the Coaches Association and all of our coaches, I'd like to give a special thank you to the NBA for providing us with this really unique platform. A special thank you to Commissioner Silver, Mark Tatum, Mike Bass, Byron Spruell, Michael Levine, Tim Frank, Paul Benedict, Dan Rube, so many others. Just a big thank you not just for this platform but for everything we work on throughout the year.

We are especially proud of the Chuck Daly Lifetime Achievement Award, which honors the memory of Hall of Famer Chuck Daly, who over an outstanding career set the standard for integrity, competitive excellence and tireless promotion of NBA basketball. Chuck was an incredible mentor to so many coaches and players in our league, including Coach Carlisle and our winner tonight, Coach Nelson.

So with that, I'd like to turn it over to NBCA president, coach Rick Carlisle.

RICK CARLISLE: Thanks, David. I first want to thank our selection committee that has been in place since 2009: Lenny Wilkens, Donnie Walsh, Pat Riley, Gregg Popovich, Phil Jackson, Joe Dumars, Billy Cunningham and Bernie Bickerstaff.

Our past winners: First winner was Tom Heinsohn, then Tex Winter, Jack Ramsay, Lenny Wilkens, Pat Riley, Bill Fitch, Bernie Bickerstaff, Dick Motta, Jerry Sloan, Hubie Brown, Al Attles, K.C. Jones, Doug Moe, Frank Layden,



Del Harris, Larry Brown, Mike Fratello, Rick Adelman and last year was Rudy Tomjanovich. This is a crescendo year, having this guy here. This is the most packed we've ever had a press conference in anticipation of this. Thanks, everyone, for being here.

Don Nelson changed the game. I'll read off his accomplishments: 31 years. 1335 victories, second all time. He was the all-time leader for many years until one of his coaching tree, Gregg Popovich, finally passed him a year or two years ago. Three-time Coach of the Year. Gold medal winner in the FIBA World Championships in 1994. Multiple 60-win seasons. Multiple All-Star Game appearances as the head coach.

Five-time champion as an NBA player, highlighted by the shot in 1969 that hit the back of the rim, bounced straight up in the air and came down. When the [Tyrese] Haliburton shot happened in the New York series, it reminded me of that moment right away. So that was pretty cool. And an All-American at Iowa.

Coaching tree: Two guys that really come to mind, Gregg Popovich, who I mentioned, Del Harris, who was a winner of this award a couple years ago.

One thing about Nellie, I came into this profession in the early 2000s and Nellie was certainly in his prime for many decades. But when you play Nellie's teams, there was always apprehension. You were always wondering, am I going to be able to play my big guys? You know, what am I going to do about these guys running around and just shooting threes from everywhere and making them?

He changed the game. He always lobbied for the game to be what it was today: No illegal defense, facilitate more ball movement, be able to play any defense. It would make the game better. It would make the players become guys that were higher-basketball IQ players that would learn how to play the game and make plays, rather than just have coaches call plays. And a lot of us were very nervous about that.

But this was a guy that had amazing foresight, and he absolutely changed the game and was a big influencer on the game that we have today.



And I'll mention one other record that I think will never be broken. Nellie has the record for the most ejections in coaching history [laughter]. I was looking this up on the internet. There are some different numbers that are thrown around, so I'll take the highest one that I saw, 79, which is a record that I'm particularly in awe of [laughter].

So with no further ado, I'd be honored to present the 2025 Chuck Daly Lifetime Achievement Award to the great Don Nelson.

[Applause.]

[Photographs taken.]

RICK CARLISLE: It's all yours, Nellie.

DON NELSON: A little harder to get up than it used to be.

Well, thank you. I just would like to say what a great honor it is to have this Chuck Daly Award. I knew Chuck before we had our private planes. We were going commercial. When teams would come in, you always had to stay over and take the first flight out the next day. Chuck always, after the game, win or lose, we'd always go out to Victor's bar and grill after the game, sit and talk about the game, talk about the game of basketball, the game we had just played. That's the kind of guy he was. So I'm so proud to be one of the many who have already received this award.

Gregg Popovich called me right after Rick did. I hadn't talked to him since he's had his stroke for a month or two. So I was happy to get his call and I said, "You know, Pop, I got the Chuck Daly Award."

He said, "I know. I'm on the board." So I figured that's the only reason I got it, or at least one of them. He's my dear friend and probably one of my best friends in my life. I'm really, really proud to be here and to share this award.

I made the Hall of Fame in 2012 and this is certainly as important to me as that was. I don't know what else to say. I'll be glad to take questions if you have any.

Q. Rick just mentioned your influence on the game. I wanted to know, what shaped your offensive philosophy? What made you see the game way you did and want to see it played that way?

DON NELSON: Well, when I played with the Celtics and I played for Red Auerbach for one year, and then Tommy Heinsohn and Bill Russell after that, we always played a game, bigs against smalls. And in the full-court game, bigs never won. Smalls always won. You play a half-court

game, bigs always won. But you get them in a full court, they didn't dribble, can't pass, make plays. So the small teams always won. I always thought in a full-court game, if you made it a fast game, not a slow game, you could beat the bigger teams.

I also figured out that there are hundreds of small guards who can just shoot the [expletive] out of the ball. Not necessarily can be point guards. They maybe can't make plays, but they could all shoot. If I had a forward that was an average shooter, like a Paul Pressey, and I ran my offense through him, I could run picks with these small guards, get them open in the corner pretty easy because they are all quick and they could all shoot, and I think that helped me beat a lot of bigger teams I was playing against.

I was never blessed with having talented big people. I finally got Bob Lanier for a couple years at the end of his career, and that was the most talented big man I had ever coached, and still is today. But I only had him for a few years. So I had to figure out ways to stay competitive with smaller teams. Because the hardest guy to find is the big man in the league. The easiest guy to find is a small guy who can shoot. So that was part of my philosophy, those two things.

Thanks for the question.

Q. I hate to break the news to you, but Victor's closed its doors on New Year's Eve.

DON NELSON: Okay.

Q. I was around you a lot in the '80s in Milwaukee, and your defensive style was a calling card for you then. Later it became a trademark that your offense was better known. How would you like those teams in Milwaukee to be remembered and how do you remember them for what they achieved?

DON NELSON: If you remember when I coached Milwaukee I lead the league in defense, several years anyway. I don't know how many, but that was our calling card. We had a great defensive team and you also had to defend.

I also learned that you had to coach with the talent that you had. When I went to some other teams, Golden State for example, we had a good offensive team but they couldn't guard anybody. It was a chore to figure out exactly what to do. So we led the team in offense, and we struggled on the defensive end. Part of a coach's job is to get the most talent out of what you have, so that's what I tried to do.

RICK CARLISLE: Nellie, he had coaches so distracted



with angst. One moment you're trying to figure out how you're going to chase around all these guys that could really shoot, and the next moment you're trying to figure out, how am I going to get the referees to call illegal defenses on all these different defenses that you're seeing out here? And it was maddening. He made teams uncomfortable for decades.

It was amazing to watch. And now, the league is a league of playmakers, largely because of his influence.

DON NELSON: Well, I have to tell you, Rick, I don't know if you remember this or not, but I was selected by the Commissioner at that time to write the rules for the illegal defense. Cotton Fitzsimmons and I wrote the rules. It's hard to get Cotton to any sort of meeting, so it was pretty much up to me to write the rules. So I had a little edge going into a few of the games, early, anyway, on how to defeat my rules [laughing].

RICK CARLISLE: Which Commissioner was this?

DON NELSON: [David] Stern. It was Stern.

Anyway, that's when I had isolation basketball, where I could take a guy like Manute Bol and isolate him up on top and some guy had to go with him. Couldn't, you know, just sag off into the paint. So I could put Manute Bol up there to let Manute Bol shoot a three every now and then from 25 feet. When the shot clock started running down, that was his cue: If the ball got to you, you could shoot that three. Otherwise, you never shoot.

We found ways to get around the rules, and maybe to win quite a few games during those times. A little to do that harder now. Everybody's got the rules down.

RICK CARLISLE: If I can mention a couple other people here. Nellie's son Donnie is here. I had the pleasure of working for Donnie for 13 years in Dallas. He has the distinction of a lot of great drafts, but he drafted Luka Doncic and Jalen Brunson in the same draft. Great that you can be here. And our friend Tim Headington, who is a big part of the logistics for this, thanks for helping out.

DON NELSON: My wife, Joy, and my friend Tom Kartsois, who started Fossil watch in Dallas and is my dear friend.

Q. You were one of the first believers in Steve Nash those early years in Dallas. And obviously the same with Dirk Nowitzki. How do you remember those years, those two guys coming together in Dallas?

DON NELSON: Dirk was the most talented big man I had

ever seen. He was close to seven feet tall and he played like a small forward. Donnie found a way to isolate him from most of the NBA scouts. They played in the World Games, European against our American players, down in San Antonio.

But Donnie got them to train in Dallas. They trained at the YMCA, and only two people are allowed in there, that was me and Donnie. So I got a chance to watch him for a week, and no other scout could come in. And I begged his friend, Holger [Geschwindner], who was with him for a lifetime, I begged him not to go down to San Antonio because I didn't want anybody to see him because I liked him that much.

He went down and ended up scoring like 35 and 15 rebounds or some number and I said, oh, man, we're not going to get him, everybody's going to see him. But they only saw him the one time, and he started slipping in the draft. We kind of knew where he was. We actually went from six to nine and got him and made enough money so we were in the black that year, instead of the red. Ross Perot Jr. liked that.

We took a gamble on him. I have to say in that draft, Paul Pierce was my favorite player. We had Paul Pierce going top three. So we didn't even consider that he would be there. Wouldn't you believe that when No. 9 came up, Paul Pierce was there, and Dirk Nowitzki. I looked at Donnie and I said, oh [expletive], Paul Pierce is my favorite player. He's going to be a star.

And Donnie says, Come on, Dad, you know what we've been doing for the last month. We were hiding him in Donnie's basement so nobody else could interview him.

Anyway, I said, You know what? You're right. We made a commitment and we'll stand on it. We took Dirk.

It was tough for a while in Dallas. People thought I was a mad scientist. They may have been right. I don't know about that one. But anyway, we stuck with him. And we got Nash in a trade. Then history can answer the rest of it, for sure.

RICK CARLISLE: My recollection on all that was that these guys got everybody to believe that even if they drafted Dirk, he wasn't going to come over for two or three years. So a lot of people passed on him. And they made it happen. The results were historic.

DON NELSON: What a player. What a human being. I'm so proud of him.

And Luka, too, my dear friend. As a matter of fact, I want



everybody to know I'm wearing Luka's shoes, his new shoes from Nike, just got on the market. I'm wearing them in protest for the trade from Dallas. I think it was a tremendous mistake by the Dallas franchise to trade him, and I want everybody to know that.

Because I learned from the best. I played a year for Red Auerbach. I played under him for Tommy Heinsohn and Bill Russell. I had the opportunity on my way, because I always went to the games early to sit and talk with Red, philosophy. And his philosophy was when you have a great player, Bill Russell, [John] Havlicek, Sam Jones, you never lose that player. You keep him for a lifetime. You put his number up and you honor that player and that's been my philosophy.

If you look at the players I've had over the years, Dirk and [Sidney] Moncrief and all the rest of them that I've coached, Nash was the exception because we were supposed to sign him and didn't. Probably destroyed my relationship with Mark Cuban at the time because I was promised that we were going to sign Nash. I thought we would be winning titles there for a few years. I thought we would have a chance to win three or four titles in a row, but losing Nash set us back a little bit.

But anyway, my philosophy was always to honor the great players, not trade them away, but to add pieces to that player and make him and your franchise the best that it could be.

So, anyway, next question.

Q. You said this means as much to you as the Hall of Fame. The fact that Rick has a mildly important basketball game to go coach in half an hour, and he's sitting here, and that it was coaches like him and Riles and Pop and others that wanted you to have this, what does that mean to you this it was your peers that chose that you had to have this award?

DON NELSON: Well, Rick is unique. He's been head of our Coaches Association for as long as I can remember. He has done a remarkable job as far as our pensions and things that a lot of you don't even know about that he's added to the coaches and our abilities to survive after coaching.

So my hat's off to Rick and the job that he's done. I forgot the rest of your question.

Q. What does it mean, your peers selected you?

DON NELSON: Yeah, the fact that you're selected by your peers really means a lot more to me than anybody else

that selects you, whether it's a vote by the fans or the number stats or something like that that people might be reading that you did or didn't do.

When your peers select you, it's just a special thing. And that's the way that I regard this honor.

Q. You were an innovator in your time. A lot of the things it seemed like you really believed in the game, the things that were considered cutting edge at the time, now feel like it's the norm in today's league. Wondering how you feel about how the game played and looks today and especially how Rick's team looks and is playing?

DON NELSON: Well, I'm enjoying this Finals as much as any that I ever remember watching. They are playing the same styles, really, when you think about it, and it's two really talented teams. They play the style that I enjoy the most, of course, a fast-paced game. I'm enjoying this very much. Both teams are just wonderful to watch. I'm a fan of both of them, really.

Oklahoma City, I've been rooting for all season and watching them especially close because of the way they play defense and the things they have done over the last couple of years and the way they play the game. And Rick's team plays very similar.

I enjoy it more than most Finals, that's for sure.

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