

# NBA Finals: Thunder vs. Pacers

Monday, June 16, 2025

Oklahoma City Thunder

Mark Daigneault

Game 5: Pregame

**Q. Do you ever get to a point in a series where there's no more adjustments to make and you just play?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: No.

**Q. Kenrich played more in Game 4 than he did the previous three games combined. What did you like from his minutes? And also, we've asked you a lot about him over the years but what has he continued to mean to this team and the leadership role he plays?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: His leadership has evolved. There was a time where he was one of the sole, you know, veteran guys, and he wasn't even a veteran. He was just like a little more of a veteran than the other guys.

Now our core guys have gained more experience. Dort, Shai have been in the league now for six years and so they have got some seasoning. He's still as impactful and a lot of it is by example. These playoffs are a great example. He's a guy that's in and out of the rotation during the regular season. Never says a thing about it. Always keeps himself ready and these playoffs are a great example of that. He didn't really play rotation minutes until the Minnesota series. He went two series in five weeks before he re-entered the mix and came out and helped us win a playoff game right off the bat and was massive the other night in Game 4.

He's just somebody that gives us a lot of versatility, toughness, matchups, things you need, and he was great in that last game.

**Q. Sam [Presti] after last season in his exit interview was sort of saying that he realized last postseason that the teams that advanced sort of won with the pass. I know this series may be an anomaly, and maybe the assist numbers don't accurately depict how you win with the pass, but that a concern for you at all in relation to the series?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think, certainly, we need to



generate more threes than we did in Game 4 for sure. Some of that is less passing and more how we are spacing the floor, how Indiana is guarding us. That's one of the things we do have to adjust as we move forward in the series, is create more outlet for the ball so that we can make those plays and get higher quality shots.

I don't think our floor game in Game 4 was a sustainable way to expect to win a series. We have to play better than that on both ends of the floor for much more of the game than we did. We were fortunate to win that one.

And then we're trying to be good at everything. Basketball is a complex game. Passing is definitely a part of that but so is a lot of other things, and we want to be as good as we can in all facets of the game. You never know which one of those facets can help you win a game. Obviously, the pass didn't win the game for us in Game 4 but we found a way to do it with other things.

**Q. You guys are already one of the deepest teams in the league. You've got a lottery pick this year that didn't play at all in Nikola Topic. Did you see much from him throughout practices this year and are you optimistic about him becoming an impact player in the league?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: It's hard to tell right now. We obviously saw him in the draft. He's exciting when you watch him on film.

In terms of what he's doing right now, he's still x amount of time post-op. He's still return-to-performance. I don't think he's the player right now that he will be in training camp.

The thing that's most impressive about him to see is he's incredibly young, he's stateside for the first time, in the NBA for the first time, coming off a long-term injury and he's been unbelievably consistent and mature and professional in his approach. When you watch somebody go through that, you can learn a lot about them. They are part of the team but they are disconnected in a lot of ways. He didn't travel on most of our trips, and he's an arm's length away a lot of the time. Yet he again approached that with great poise and professionalism.

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Inserted himself into the mix in a very appropriate way. The guys really respect the way that he approaches things. He's an old soul. He's way beyond his years and so that bodes really well for him, regardless where he starts as a player on the court. That stuff translates, and he's been very impressive with that.

**Q. When you get to the last week of the season, everybody is tired and worn down on some level, what's the balance that you see from your guys with the grind and fatigue that comes at this point of the year versus the excitement that comes from being two wins away from winning the thing?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Way more excitement than being grinded down. I think right after the games, you're feeling -- I'm not feeling it; I have a great seat, just like you. They are feeling it after the games. Because you empty the tank in these games. That's what the games require in the playoffs, and the guys do an unbelievable job of that, all the teams.

But we recover. The Finals are great because you get extra time in between the games. I think that's huge in terms of rest and recovery at this time of the year. I think it's good for the product. I think it's a good thing and by the time the ball goes up in the air, everybody is going to be ready to play and everybody is going to be excited.

**Q. You look at Shai and as great a player as he is, for a high-usage point guard, is there another level for him to get to as a playmaker?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: He's getting better every year in just about everything. I think he's really improved as a playmaker. A lot of the things he throws, the nature of a lot of those plays, because of the way he gets guarded a lot of the time, he's thrown early passes that are not necessarily assist-type plays. There's one last game where he zips it across the floor to Dort. Lu is in long closeout, drives the ball, he hits the paint and finds Holmgren for a wide-open three. Those types of plays don't get reflected in the numbers.

And then he's an unbelievable scorer, and incredibly efficient. We lean into that. He leans into that. He's learned when teams load up on him and they overcommit, to get off it early, and I think that's reflected in the way we've played offense throughout the course of the season, throughout the last two years, really.

**Q. Game 3 you had trouble inbounding the ball and it came up a little bit in Game 4. Is that something Indiana is doing or what's causing what's such a fundamental play, a little bit of a headache for you?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, they are pressuring 94 feet basically on a lot of plays and contesting the ball inbounds. It opens the floor up at times. There's a play where Jalen Williams in the first half he gets a screen at 80 feet and ripping downhill and he's at the front of the rim. That's the cost of doing business when you do that on their end of things and we have to continue to attack that pressure.

When you contest that many inbound passes, you're bound to be disruptive at times. I thought all of our turnovers in Game 3 were well intended. We were trying to get the ball inbounds quickly and McConnell was sneaking around, stealing those passes. We gained an awareness of that, and we were better at that in Game 4. Hopefully clean with that tonight.

**Q. Will we see Isaiah Hartenstein being in the starting lineup again, and can you say what you liked about him being the last time in the starting lineup?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: What I like about him in the starting lineup is the same thing I like about him no matter where he is in the rotation is his physicality, defense, rebounding, screening, offensive rebounding, IQ on both ends.

The people that have covered us all year know I don't release the starters or any rotation insights pregame, and I'm not going to start in June.

**Q. You talked about the two days in between games and how it benefits the players. I wonder how you approach it as a coach. Do you do twice as much work? Do you get more rest? How does the staff approach that extra day versus the Conference Finals?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I do twice as much parenting, not twice as much work.

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