

# NBA Finals: Thunder vs. Pacers

Thursday, June 5, 2025

Oklahoma City Thunder

Mark Daigneault

Game 1: Pregame

**Q. Mark, you talked a little bit yesterday about this is the only organization you know in the NBA, and you grew up here. When you took the job here [as the NBA G League head coach], what appealed to you about being in the NBA?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I was working in college. I had a great setup. I was working with Billy Donovan at Florida. My now wife and I had moved in together, so I was very stable there.

But I knew Sam a little bit. The G League job, it was the D League back then, represented an opportunity to be a head coach in an organization that I knew had a great reputation. Then the more I learned about it, the more I spent time with Sam, it became apparent that it was a good opportunity. It turned out to be a great opportunity. I'm incredibly grateful for him taking the chance on me back then when he did.

I'm just trying to do the best I can in any role that I have in the organization.

**Q. Have you found yourself trying to kind of gather the emotions of the team or has everything been the same?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I just let them go through it. You can try to talk about it all you want, but you'd be guessing. Both teams are going to be excited to play. Both teams are going to go out there and have to battle the same sorts of things.

So, we'll settle into the game. They'll settle into the game. The game will come down to the same things. I try not to overcoach things that are hypothetical or anything like that.

**Q. Just some of the benefits of having so many good defenders, but in Lu in particular, a guy that has bought into the role since he started in the NBA. You can head into these series against elite perimeter players and have some confidence that you have**



**somewhere to start. What is the benefit and luxury of that?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, there's a huge luxury to Lu because I think more so than anything I could say about him, I think the other players don't like playing against him. He's just an irritant. He's physical, relentless. He's well-studied at this point in his career. He's experienced.

Having the other guys, there's just a compounding effect to having that type of point-of-attack defense not just with the Wallace, Caruso, Dub layer, but even the bigs can get out on the floor, then the other guys that don't get the same reputation are pretty good. They're competitive and they execute the schemes.

It gives us huge flexibility and versatility, but certainly having a guy that takes on those matchups like Lu is a great place to start.

**Q. What growth have you seen from Alex Caruso as a defender now versus when you first coached him in the G League?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: He was a rookie when we coached him in the G League. He was good. Like smart, tough, had the same physical profile. He wasn't as strong as he is now.

He always had that stuff, but he was just learning the pictures. I remember his first training camp. He was guarding Westbrook. He was like getting torched by Westbrook, as anybody would have been as a rookie, and as most of the league was at that time. Just Westbrook's speed and power.

I was watching Alex through the lens of he was going to end up playing for us. I was watching more him than Westbrook. I was like, man, that was gory.

Now it's amazing what he's done because now he can handle all the matchups. I think it's because he's really studied the league, learned how to play angles, tendencies. He's like an encyclopedia on that end of the floor. There was that famous article about [Shane] Battier in whatever out that was. He's like that. Kind of a

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computer on that end of the floor. He applies it to the game. It's very impressive.

**Q. You have a lot of G League players on your roster, guys that have that history. The Pacers have some, too. What does that say about the G League and its importance for this franchise, maybe more wholly the league, and what characteristics do those guys bring to your team?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Zooming out in the larger system of the NBA, it's a salary cap system that's designed to pull everybody to the middle. So the way that you have to navigate that is with player development. Player development has a fixed capacity in terms of minutes. You only have 82 games, you only have 48 minutes a game. The best way to develop players is for them to play.

If you can't use NBA game minutes, it becomes about how you can navigate that. The G League is the next best thing in terms of guys getting experience, guys growing their game, learning their game, staying confident. It's a huge part of that if they're not playing.

You can find obviously really good players in the G League, as most teams have experienced over the last few years. There's a lot of good players out there that just need the right opportunity. We try to stay open-minded not only with the guys that we are sending there but the guys that are in the program that are not under a contract at any given point in time.

**Q. You guys foul a lot, especially for a team that's as high ranked defensively as you are. Orlando is another team that was super high ranked, also fouled a lot. Historically you see teams that are really good defenses have low foul rates. Do you feel like that's a trend in the league at all, that people are trying to figure out how to be aggressive while still being successful defensively?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think it's kind of the cost of doing business with physicality. I think Indiana has fouled a lot in these playoffs. I think if you are to unpack why that is it's because they're pressuring the way they are. They're incredibly physical on the perimeter. They are in the ball, up the floor, pursuing over screens. It's disruptive to play against. A tradeoff of that is you end up getting whistles.

A lot of it for us is learning which ones we don't want to give. A guy gathers the ball, we've got them about to take a tough shot, Nembhard is good at that, he knows how to get those calls. He deserves the calls.

If you're reaching in late, he's about to shoot a long two,

those are the ones you want to lay off of. Some of them are just a cost of physicality. I think both of these teams are incredibly physical. That's kind of a tradeoff you have to incur.

**Q. To go off something you said a minute ago, in this cap era, it is designed to make everyone pull to the middle. The winner of this series is going to be the seventh different champion in seven years. That said, does it surprise you that there has been this revolving door, if you will, in the last seven years of teams that get to this point? In this parity era, does it surprise you we've seen this many different teams make their way to the Finals with these rules?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I've never thought about it. I just think generally it's good for the league. It's healthy for the league for all 30 teams to be constantly positioning. If you're good, you have to navigate being good. If you're not good, there's systematic things that can help you. I think generally that's good for the league.

We're not focused on what's good for the league. We're focused on what's good for the Thunder. We're trying to operate within that environment. The way to do that is be savvy with roster building, which Sam is. Once the guys are here, we try to max out the development of those players. When you do that over time, it can pay dividends even in a constraining system.

**Q. Players talk about how other guys they know who have been in NBA Finals reach out, tell them what it's like, what's different. What coaches have you talked to and what have they told you about what's different or specific about an NBA Finals?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I don't have a lot of friends [smiling]. I'm embarrassed. Never been more embarrassed in my life [laughter].

I talked to Billy Donovan right after we clinched. He's somebody obviously I've worked with, that's played on high-level stages, got some insight from him.

I haven't, like, scanned the coaching circles. I don't have Phil Jackson's number.

**Q. We've all done stories about teams that have had a long process to rebuilding. You had a reset moment. There's a long view, right? Did you ever name that, talk about that? In Philly they would say, "Trust the process." I don't know if you ever had a name for that or description for what that long view was.**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think we had clarity, but we didn't

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name it. We just tried to take it a day at a time, to be honest with you. Player at a time, week at a time, month at a time, a year at a time, just keep investing and see where it takes us.

This was never the plan specifically. There was never a specific timeline. You plan as many seasons as you can and you tend to them, then you see what happens.

We've gotten some good luck in this period of time, too, that we're not denying at all. We've also tried to control what we can. The guys have done an incredible job. It's landed us in a great spot.

But as grateful as we are for that, we understand we have to keep investing if we want to keep reaping the long-term benefits of that.

**Q. Can you say something about what kind of role we will see Isaiah Hartenstein playing this series? Also, some thoughts that you have about him, seeing how he started with the G League, all the teams he went through. Finally getting the role with the Knicks and now having an impact on your team.**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I can't say enough about him as a guy. He's got an unbelievable story. He was born to play basketball. If he was 6-2, he'd still be playing basketball. He loves the game. He's an incredible teammate that's integrated so seamlessly into the team. He's an unbelievable competitor that lines up and plays every single night.

He gives himself to the game. He screens, he crashes, runs, communicates, he does all the invisible things that help your team. I think that's why teams play well when he's on the court, including ours.

In this series he'll be critical. Great screen setter, which against their pressure is critical. Great offensive rebounder and an offensive rebounding threat. Defensively, he's a great quarterback back there that can get you into coverages, sniff out what's going on. He's been a huge part of our season and will continue to be in this series.

**Q. You're up to fifth on the NBA head coaches' longevity for current job. Two of the guys ahead of you beat you by a few weeks. Do you feel like a veteran as a coach here on the eve of your first NBA Finals?**

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Not when I'm coaching against Rick Carlisle, no [smiling]. I feel like a rookie.

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