

# NBA Finals: Thunder vs. Pacers

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**Adam Silver**

Commissioner Media Conference



ADAM SILVER: Hello, everyone. Welcome to Oklahoma City. Just a few opening remarks from me, then happy to take any questions.

Just to put some context around these Finals, Herb Simon, the owner of the Indiana Pacers, is the longest-standing owner in the NBA. He bought the team with his brother, Mel, in 1983 at a time when the NBA Finals were still on tape delay on the East Coast and were on 11:30 in New York where I grew up.

At that point in the league's history, when Herb Simon bought the team, the Celtics and Lakers had won 60% of the Finals to that point in league history.

Roughly two decades later, Clay Bennett bought this team. In that year, in 2006, there were major technological changes happening in the world. It was the year that Twitter launched, Google bought YouTube, that Facebook extended beyond universities to the general public. It was just about a year before Apple launched its first iPhone.

I've been thinking about those dates because it was really in 2006 going forward that enabled the NBA, which had been on a path to going global, to become essentially supercharged in the way that through smartphones, social media, the Internet, that our games could truly become accessible anywhere.

Jump ahead two more decades to today. As you all know, roughly 30% of our players are born outside the United States. Our games are essentially available to anyone in the world who has access to the Internet or Wi-Fi or a smartphone for that matter. The last seven MVPs were born outside the United States, Shai being the latest.

Also, just on the point of small markets, Mayor Holt here in Oklahoma City I thought said it best. Of the 19,502 cities, towns and villages in the United States, Oklahoma City is larger than 19,482 of them. Said differently, about 300 million Americans live in cities smaller than Oklahoma City and Indianapolis, which is a bit larger. That means that 88% of Americans live somewhere smaller than these

cities.

Lastly, I'll say even more importantly, as a global sport, you can feel the passion for this team and for NBA basketball here in Oklahoma City. That's a passion felt globally.

So having said that, happy to answer any questions.

**Q. To continue the trend, I think we asked you this in Denver two years ago, Boston last year, now here. It's seven different champions in seven years, no matter who wins. David [Stern] handed trophies to eight different franchises in his 30 years. You're about to hand a trophy to your ninth in 12 years. Did you ever envision that this run would continue for as long as it has, and how good or not or indifferent is it for the league that there is this diversity of champions every year?**

ADAM SILVER: First of all, I was talking about those statistics when Herb Simon of course bought his team. 60% of championships had been won by two teams. Then now jump ahead another 15 years or so, a little longer, 65 years into the league, three teams had won 60% of the championships.

I remember when I first joined the league, David used to joke early on in his tenure, David Stern, as commissioner, he said his job was to go back and forth between Boston and L.A. handing out championship trophies.

To your point, I think it was very intentional, it didn't begin with me, it began with David and successive Collective Bargaining Agreements, that we set out to create a system that allowed for more competition in the league, with the goal being having 30 teams all in position, if well managed, to compete for championships. That's what we're seeing here.

I've said before, the goal is that market size essentially becomes irrelevant. I'd say the reason I wanted to talk a little bit about technology earlier, in part it's the successive collective bargaining agreements, and thank you to the players because I think they all recognized we had an interest in serving the fans. Fans in every city want to see their team be competitive.

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In addition, these technological changes have changed the meaning of the differential from one city to another. This is, I don't know, roughly 700,000 in Oklahoma City, I think around 900,000 in Indianapolis. Not such small markets, as Mayor Holt pointed out. Even if there were another million people or so in a city, when you're talking about a global market in a sport like the NBA where we're being followed by billions of people around the world, those incremental changes become pretty meaningless.

Back to your question, I can't say standing here that I'd envision we would have seven different champions over seven years. I would only say the goal isn't necessarily to have a different champion every year. As we said, it's to have parity of opportunity. Hats off to Oklahoma City and Indianapolis, two incredibly well-run franchises, top to bottom, that deserve to be here.

Whichever team were to win, if they were to repeat, I wouldn't then be saying this, therefore, isn't working because I didn't go to a different city to hand out the trophy. I'd be saying that's the system we wanted to create, as long as there's a level playing field.

Again, what we're focused is on the process that goes into building the team, not the outcome. So the outcomes will be whatever they are.

**Q. We see you several times a year. Almost always comes up about expansion. What is the current temperature among the Board of Governors to expand the NBA, whether it's Seattle or another American city? What have you found in your committees so far?**

ADAM SILVER: Yeah, sure. Let me answer expansion two ways. One, there is of course expansion of current NBA teams. There I'd say the current sense is we should be exploring it. I don't think it's automatic because it depends on your perspective on the future of the league.

As I've said before, expansion in a way is selling equity in the league. If you believe in the league, you don't necessarily want to add partners. On the other hand, we recognize there are underserved markets in the United States and elsewhere, I think markets that deserve to have NBA teams. Probably even if we were to expand, more than we can serve.

We have an owners' meeting in July in Las Vegas. It will be on the agenda to take the temperature of the room. We have committees that are already talking about it. But my sense is at that meeting, they're going to give direction to me and my colleagues at the league office that we should continue to explore it.

The second part of the answer. What also comes to mind in terms of expansion is the opportunity potentially to create other competition around the world. I think, as you know, five years ago or so we created a league, a competition of existing clubs in Africa. Mark Tatum is here, deputy commissioner, chief operating officer, he's hard at work on that, as are several colleagues.

We have been discussing potentially creating a league in Europe. I view that as a form of expansion as well. Again, just as the same as in American cities, we think there's an opportunity to serve fans in Europe. No knock on European basketball, because most of those international MVPs I just talked about are coming from Europe. There's really high-level basketball being played there. But we think there is an opportunity to better serve fans there. I view that as a form of expansion as well, and that's something we're also thinking hard about.

**Q. This is a Finals with obviously two great teams, maybe historically so. It's not one with a ton of star power. What do you think the league can do to raise the profile of some of these great players in smaller markets? Also, if you think that's the responsibility of the league.**

ADAM SILVER: One, I'm not sure I completely buy into the premise of your question. I think Shai is an enormous star. Tyrese, Pascal. I get it -- in fairness, not at the level of some other stars that we've had in this league, maybe not as prominent as some players currently still playing in the league.

I would only say that those players, say LeBron and Steph, Kevin Durant, who are better known nationally and globally than some of these players, they are in those positions because of their success on the floor. I think much less about the size of market they happen to play in.

It's my expectation, I mean, first of all, whoever comes out of this championship series will rise to the next level almost automatically. But then I think over time those stars are made on the floor, not by the league office.

But having said that, is there more we can do? Absolutely. We've been talking a lot about it at the league in terms of what's the best way to promote players going forward. We have an enormous presence on social media. We have our new network partners coming in next year who have huge marketing arms: NBC, Peacock, Amazon of course, ESPN, ABC, Disney. I think collectively there is more we can do.

There's a lot more competition than there used to be. It's



harder to break through. There are more resources. More access through social media and other platforms, part of those technological options that I referred to before. But there's also a lot more noise out there, and people have so many other entertainment options, unlimited numbers of channels, YouTube, et cetera, other things they can be doing. I think we have to up our game as well at the league office to market those players.

**Q. Through these playoffs, Jayson Tatum, debilitating injury. Stephen Curry, a series-changing injury. There's been discussion about the compressed nature of the playoff schedule, because of the elongated schedule of the regular season, an unintended consequence. Is that something that the league office looks at when you see injuries to star players? Is there nothing you can do about that because of how you conduct the regular season?**

ADAM SILVER: Well, I'm not sure it's a function of the regular season. I mean, there's a certain cadence to the playoffs. If anything, there is more spacing in the playoff games than when you and I grew in the NBA. We used to frequently play playoff games back-to-back on the weekends.

Having said that, we of course look at it very closely. Byron Spruell is here. We have a Competition Committee coming up next week, then another one in July in Las Vegas. Part of what we do is look at every form of data we can get our hands on. That includes minutes played, injuries. It includes whatever impact we see that back-to-backs are having on players, not just measured in injuries but by production on the floor. So we are going to continue to look at it.

I don't think there's any magic bullets here. In fact, injuries are considerably down this playoffs from what it's been historically. I think it's our second lowest in 10 years. We have pretty healthy teams coming into the Finals now.

We look at it very closely. This question comes up a lot. I don't want to make a change just to make a change. People are asking should we shorten the season, spread the games out over a longer period of time. I don't necessarily think we should reduce the number of games. If we had more days to work with, there is no question that if players are better rested, putting aside injuries, that that potentially leads to a little bit of heightened competition. I think a little bit what you see in the playoffs, too, because they're better rested.

We're up against also players needing to take time off, needing to have an offseason. We will continue to look at it.

**Q. In regard to the All-Star Game, will next year's All-Star Game be U.S. players versus the world? I know it's not your job to throw your hands up in the air and give up, but given the nature of All-Star Games across all sports, the modern athlete, is there any part of you that considers the All-Star Game is what it is, and it's not going to return to what it used to be?**

ADAM SILVER: Well, the second part of your question, I mean, nothing ever is what it used to be. But I think to your point, it's my job not to give up, but also to innovate and to look for new approaches.

I've talked before, I follow all the other sports. I think what the NHL did with the 4 Nations Face-Off I thought was very effective. There's a long history of the international competition in the NBA and in global basketball. We had a spectacular Olympics last summer with huge ratings, an enormous amount of interest.

I also recognize there are some forces working against us. That largely often is players needing a rest during the season, maybe teams not encouraging their players to play the hardest for what is viewed as an exhibition game.

The first part of your question, we are looking at something that brings an international flavor into All-Star competition. I think, as I said the other day, we're still experimenting internally with different formats, talking to the Players Association about that.

I don't think a straight-up USA versus World makes sense. That's not what they did in the NHL either. There probably will be some different teams we form. Whether it's some regional basis for how we combine certain groups of players, because USA players, who I talked about earlier, international is 30% of the league, American players are still 70% of the league.

I think we can play off that nationalism. We are moving to NBC next year for the All-Star Game, where we used to be many years ago. We'll be smack in the middle of Winter Olympic competition on NBC. Our All-Star Game, which will be in the afternoon instead of the evening next year, will be coming right out of Olympic competition, going back to Winter Olympic competition after the game.

I think the players will get into the mood. We have had positive conversations. I know I've been up here before saying I think I have a fix. I haven't been successful so far (smiling). But I think we're onto something. I think there's a real opportunity to create enhanced interest and enhanced competition from the players.



**Q. Obviously expansion has been a topic that has been discussed for a while. You said it's going to be an official topic next month. When you say you expect the recommendation to be to explore it further, do you think there will be a formalized process of really actively engaging in what that would look like? Or is it something different?**

ADAM SILVER: What I expect is if a decision is made that there should be further exploration by the league office and presumably a committee of team owners, it would be more of a formal process.

There's been no lack of interest. Certainly I've gotten a lot of unsolicited calls. I essentially have said to people from several different cities, We're just not engaging in that process right now. I want to be fair to everyone. So I don't want to have meeting with some and not others.

So if we were to say yes, we're now going to move into a more formal exploratory phase, we would take those meetings and in addition likely we would engage with outside advisors who would look at markets, look at economic opportunities and media opportunities, et cetera.

I'll just add, I've said this before, one of the factors in terms of potential expansion is local media. We do need to figure out something there. I mean, for the league, we have several of our team regional networks have actually shut down. Others have recently come out of bankruptcy. Others seem to be teetering. We're going through a transition in media.

By the way, it's not for lack of interest in local media rights. In fact, I personally think it's the best value in all of sports right now because it's where we have the most engagement is a team in its market. There's nothing close to it than the national interest in a team.

There's been disruption because there's been a dramatic decline in traditional television. The streaming services, which view themselves as national and global, haven't really localized in a way yet to do team-specific deals. But I think we're going to see that.

As I said, we will be fine because I have no doubt in terms of the value of that content.

**Q. You were saying that if you could expand the year, you could get more days between games. Is the problem with shortening the regular-season schedule just financial? If financial is such a big part of it, you guys do so many creative things, could you take some of the expansion city money if you have some come in to dull that blow? Are there other ways that you're**

**looking at that could shorten the season but take into the financial obstacle or hurdle into account?**

ADAM SILVER: Money's part of it, there's no question about it. We're a business. Having said that, I don't really see the benefit to reducing the number of games. People used to say you should reduce the number of games because it will lead to a reduction in a number of injuries. We have absolutely no data to suggest that. If that were the case, you would think you have more injuries in April than October. We don't see that. Or you would think you'd see more injuries in the playoffs than you do in the regular season. We don't see that either.

Another way of looking at the length of the season, if you think in terms of serving the fans, it's more opportunity for fans to go to games and to watch games.

Yes, there would be an economic reduction if we reduce the number of games, so that's a factor. But I don't see an overall benefit. I don't think keeping the start and end of the season at the same points, reducing the number of games and adding some rest is enough of a reason, I would just say it that way, to start reducing the number of games.

We'll continue to look at it. I would rather than start earlier maybe or push a little bit later.

Maybe the last thing I'll say on that. The whole way media works and television works has changed so dramatically. Just by way of example, all of us of a certain age know it used to be the case that new programs launched in the fall. There were never new programs in the summer. Nobody thinks that way anymore. New programs are launching all the time on Netflix, Amazon Prime, Peacock, whatever service you use. We don't think that way.

Also, frankly, ratings have changed from what they used to be. Netflix is the most valuable pure play media company out there. Nobody in this room knows what their ratings are. We don't even think in terms of ratings. We think maybe in terms of popularity, buzz around a program. We're going through a transition and we're going to work through that.

**Q. We just got done with the Minnesota Timberwolves sale closing. It was a protracted thing that ended up in the courts, got a little messy. I think you've said before you don't advocate for staged deals anymore. What lessons can you learn from how that played out to how the Boston Celtics sale coming up might go through?**

ADAM SILVER: I'd just say that the Boston Celtics deal I





don't think of as a staged deal. They're still in the process of completing it. It's really more about a phase-out of current ownership. I think there Bill Chisholm, who is the incoming owner, he's got to sort of straighten out some affairs in his life and his business. He's currently located on the West Coast. I think he's a huge admirer of Wyc Grousbeck and the way he's been running that team. Obviously their results speak for themselves.

What he's working out with Wyc is an opportunity for him, as I said, to learn the business from Wyc, then step in as the principal owner, the Governor of the team. There would then be no switching going forward.

I think in the situation in Minnesota, yes, as I said before, I mean, it's not ideal to have those kinds of staged transactions. But also you learn it's nice to state these principles, but there we were in the middle of a pandemic, and Glen Taylor was in the process of selling his team. We all agreed to something that seemed to make sense in the moment.

**Q. I know you and Mark Tatum have been extensively focused on the growth of the game in Africa. When you look at Siakam's story, and how obscure it is for him to have made it to the NBA, do you believe the road is much easier, not easier, but much better now than it was during his arrival?**

ADAM SILVER: Well, just back to Pascal Siakam, as a reminder to everyone in the room, he was the 27th pick in the draft. He obviously was the MVP of our Conference Finals. There's an enormous amount of talent out there in the world. Maybe it makes the point too that while it's a lot harder to find a diamond in the rough, I wouldn't call a diamond in the rough, and I wouldn't call a diamond in the rough the 27th pick in the first round of the NBA Draft.

But one thing we are seeing in Africa, and Mark Tatum can attest to this, he has been spending a lot of time there, I have spent a fair amount of time in Africa. There is so much talent. I think one of the things we have to decide as a league working with FIBA, our federation, is how much we should be investing in helping develop that talent, especially at an elite level. We have academies in Africa.

Also, to put it in terms of the magnitude, I recently read this statistic, that in five years from now, not 25 years from now, but five years from now, it's projected that over 40 percent of the youth of the world will live in Africa. So to the extent that we are a growing sport and we're not the No. 1 sport in Africa, it's likely soccer, but we're pretty much the No. 2, maybe rugby in some markets, certainly the fastest growing sport. As we look out to the future, not just in terms of where our players are going to come from,

but also Africa as a market. I mean, roughly 55 countries, larger than China collectively in terms of population, a faster growing population. Six of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world. We're really focused on that continent.

I think it's not my money I'm investing, I work here, but I think it's a discussion we continue to have with team governors of taking a longer-term view. As I said, that statistic I mentioned was five years, not 25 years. I think as we look out and Mark looks out over the next 10 years, what does that opportunity to continue to develop the sport in Africa? I think it's enormous.

Back to my first point about technology, you have this huge install base now of smartphones throughout Africa. People's ability to watch the games where they are without cable, traditional broadcast systems.

I'm very optimistic about the continent and our ability to continue to grow the game there.

**Q. You were talking about the progress towards equality of opportunity from a business standpoint with these teams. As this CBA has gotten kind of, pursued a more flatter type of profile, was there any thought or could be there any thought about the advantages that lower tax regions have as it relates to more of a restrictive salary cap picture?**

ADAM SILVER: That issue comes up a lot. We talk about it in bargaining. In essence, the question goes to disadvantages and advantages in certain states and certain markets. Somebody might say well, this city is more attractive for these following reasons, but also has higher taxes, there's climate differential, size of market.

I think ultimately what we've learned is that while I think that's a factor for players making decisions, it's not risen to the level, just take your specific question in terms of taxation, that we have a sense that players are not going to certain markets because the tax rate is higher there as opposed to somewhere else.

I think ultimately part of the balance in the system is player becomes a free agent and has the right to make that decision, where they want to be. We just want to make sure every team is in a position to compete for that player's talent.

But it just gets too complex in short to start factoring in all those different differentials from city to city.

**Q. Quick question on media. In your opening remarks you talked about market size, ratings. Normally after**

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**signing a \$76 billion media deal, you don't see commissioners or sports executives in general, after what would many assume to be a successful media negotiation, having to defend the league. What do you make of the conversation around the business of your game, not necessarily the game itself?**

ADAM SILVER: It's a great question. I think about it a lot.

I mean, on one hand I'm looking at Mike Bass, the head of communications. I like the fact that people are talking about us. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing.

It seems a little unusual how much discussion there is around ratings in this league. Again, as I said, I'm a fan of all sports, I follow lots of media. It seems like there's a lot more chatter. Even for me sort of walking on the street, fans coming up to me, it frustrates me that the first thing they say is, how are the ratings? What are the ratings going to be? As opposed to, wow, you have two incredible Conference Finals, what a great playoff series you've had.

I can't quite put my finger on it. Joe Dumars, who just left the league office, said to me, we were talking about it one day in the office. It's a thing about the NBA. It's part of the culture in the NBA that we're self-critical, that our fans, it's part of the culture around the league to be looking at what's bad as opposed to what's good.

I think it seeps into our coverage, quite honestly, sometimes. I think to the earlier question, maybe on the league office sometimes to maybe find better ways that we can be marketing our sport.

I've come to accept it. By the way, I should add it comes from a time when earlier in the history of this league, the competition was dominated by a few teams. So then it becomes more part of the conversation that somehow it must be a bad thing for the league if one of those teams isn't competing.

Obviously, to be very clear and intentional, I love what's happening in the league right now. I've been an advocate for these changes. I think it's great that we have two so-called small markets competing. But I'm not even sure it's fair to describe them that way.

I think we want a league ultimately where if you are a fan of the game of basketball, by definition you're going to want to tune into the Finals because this is the best basketball that is being played, these are the two teams that have fought through a difficult and competitive and long regular season, gotten to essentially the fourth round, which is the Finals. Here they are.

I don't want to complain too much about it because I'd rather people be talking about us than not talking about us. I think it's just part of the culture of this league.

One thing I wanted to say at the end, briefly share my appreciation and gratitude to Turner Sports. They were our partners for 41 years. I was with the league for 33 of those 41 years.

Their coverage has been fantastic. It's not just the on-air talent, but I want to share my appreciation and thanks with literally the hundreds, probably over the 41 years, thousands of people who have worked on NBA production, wish them well. Just make sure we acknowledge them, since this past weekend they went off the air.

With that, everyone, thank you for being here and enjoy the game tonight.

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