

# NBA Finals: Thunder vs. Pacers

Saturday, June 7, 2025

Indiana Pacers

Coach Rick Carlisle

Practice Day

**Q. It was alluded to the other night about how much the game has changed in your time as a head coach, but you've always stayed on top of the offensive evolution. What do you enjoy about the way the game is played today that appeals to your offensive sensibilities?**

RICK CARLISLE: Speed, skill. I think the skill aspect is the thing that's the most compelling part of the game, and we're getting to a point now where everybody on the floor, not a hundred percent of the five men, but all the guys, one through four, can make threes, drive it, make plays.

And we're getting to a point now where more of the five men can do that than not. It's made the game a lot more difficult to defend, obviously. But the skill aspect of it is, to me, always going to be the most compelling part about the beauty of watching the game and the challenge and the beauty of teaching the game.

**Q. What sets Drew apart as a defensive player? He doesn't have "jump out of the gym" athleticism, but he has great functional athleticism. What sets him apart and makes him good at what he does?**

RICK CARLISLE: He loves the challenge. He has a great intellectual curiosity about defense and the challenge of trying to -- I mean, you don't stop players today. You try to make it hard. He played with Shai on the Olympic team and so they have familiarity. They are both from Canada and they both have played a lot with and against each other over the years.

But this is the ultimate challenge, a guy like him who is the MVP. He's just so skilled, so quick, bigger than you think. Everybody talks about the lethal mid-range, but he makes threes easily, too. He lives at the free throw line. So there's no breaks. There's no breaks. But Drew is one of these guys that he has an equal focus on the defensive end as the offensive end, and that's -- it's a bit rare with today's players.



**Q. I'm curious to get your take. The Thunder foul a lot for a very good defense. Historically, normally, really high-ranked defenses don't foul a ton, and we are starting to see more in the league now. You guys have fouled a lot during the playoffs but have been successful defensively. Orlando fouled a lot during the regular season, really good defense. Are you seeing anything different in the way the game is played today that allows teams to be higher foul teams but still super successful and bring that into the strategy differently than how it used to be?**

RICK CARLISLE: You're making it sound like we plan on fouling a lot. We are not. We are trying to defend well without fouling and to avoid unnecessary fouls. But the game has gotten more physical in the last year and a half, whatever, as changes were made to interpretations. I'm a believer that that's the right way to go. Nobody wants to come to an NBA game and watch a free throw-shooting contest and have a game last for three hours.

And so, I don't know, the game is more physical. As far as the fouls, it's not something we want to do a lot of. There are a significant number of good defensive teams that don't foul a lot, too. Boston comes to mind. They are a low-foul team.

But we're still working at becoming better and better and better, and certainly one of our challenges is to reduce fouls.

**Q. Everyone has written a lot about how you were 10-15 and then the turnaround started around the first of January. Paris was a couple weeks into that. Did that week over there bring this team together in some ways? That experience, coming out of it, did you notice something new about your group?**

RICK CARLISLE: Well, it was the middle, latter stages of January, which was our turnaround month. I think we only lost two games that month. One of the games was in Paris. We lost the first game in Paris, and we're playing against Victor and we've got all the Paris fans there. There's a lot coming at us. You know, it was literally us against the entire world. We didn't play well that first game. We had a pretty quick turnaround without the

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benefit of a practice day because of how the schedule had gone.

And so we had to turn things around pretty quickly if we were going to have a chance to win the second game. We had a couple of very productive meetings, and there was a lot of conversations.

I like to open up our meetings to conversations and sometimes listen to the players first after a game like that. I mean it, was embarrassing. We lost by 30-something. Victor went crazy. All their guys were -- played great.

So we talked through it, and it was an important moment. Going into the second game, this is a massive place, there's 20-some-thousand, and all these challenges, and we were able to galvanize for that second game, and then it was big.

Then we stayed over. Came home the next day, and I think we had two days, and then we had a really difficult game with Detroit at home, who had kicked our ass two or three weeks earlier in one of the Cup games. You know, and they were still like on the come, they were getting better and better and better. And so we really had to be tough for that, and then we had another tough game. You know, we finished the month pretty well. That month was key.

I mean, the Paris trip, certainly, probably part of it. We talked a lot about the Paris trip even before the season started and the challenges it was going to present, but also the opportunity that it would present. We had to manage, it's two games in nine days. So you've got the front end. We had to get over there and do three days of media, similar to this, and then we had to have an off-day as far as being on the court between days. And so we had to figure some things out, but it certainly was a part of it.

**Q. Not only watching you guys play for more than a month now but also listening and talking to you guys after these games and practices, I know how much of a focus rebounding can be and how occasionally it's a challenge for you. You won the rebounding battle on Thursday 56-39. How were you able to do that, and how much of a factor was it in the win?**

RICK CARLISLE: Yeah, I think I mentioned this after the game. We had turned it over so much and gotten -- they had gotten 20 more shots than we got. So, there weren't as many chances for them to get rebounds because we were just throwing the ball away or they were stealing it or whatever.

So look, the possession stats are always going to be

massively important. Ball security, rebounding, the offensive glass, all that kind of stuff. I don't think we're far enough into it yet to do a total analysis of everything. But if we didn't win the rebounding battle and turned it over 25 times, there's no way we could have hung in and had a chance.

**Q. It was one of Shai's highest-usage games of the season, lower pass-out rate for him as well. We've seen something similar from you guys against Donovan Mitchell in Cleveland, against Brunson in the New York series. What did you think about the defensive process on that No. 1 option in the first game, and is that something that may be counterintuitive but something you look to play to, get the No. 1 usage guy going and everybody else, keep their rhythm out of it?**

RICK CARLISLE: We are not looking to get Shai going. That doesn't make any sense.

I mean, coming into the series, their wins/losses in playoffs, he was in the 30s in wins and low to mid 20s in losses.

So what you're saying doesn't really make sense, you know what I mean. We want to make it hard. Each game -- each game in this series is going to look different. I mean, every game in every other series we've played, a playoff series is a series of seven chapters, and each one takes on a different personality.

We don't want Shai getting 38 points if we can avoid it. We don't want him living on the free throw line. We don't want him getting easy threes. We don't want him making that three at the end of the third quarter. That was a tough shot, but he banged that in.

We have to make it hard on him. Look, everybody's pattern after a loss is to come more aggressively. So he's going to be more aggressive. Williams is going to be more aggressive. Chet is going to be more aggressive. Their whole team is going to be even more aggressive defensively.

The challenge for us is to be able to match that. And so, you know, that's kind of it.

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