INDIANA
PACERS VS THUNDER
OKLAHOMA CITY

PLAYERS TO WATCH

THUNDER

SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

League MVP led Thunder to 68 wins and is now averaging 29.8 points and 6.9 assists per game in postseason … Scored at least 30 in four of five conference finals games … At 26, already a three-time All-NBA first team selection.

JALEN WILLIAMS

Averaged 21.6 points, 5.3 rebounds and 5.1 assists during the regular season … All-NBA third-team honoree and second-team All-Defensive team … Scored playoff career-high 34 points in Game 4 win over Minnesota in conference finals.

PACERS

TYRESE HALIBURTON

Named to All-NBA third team in each of the past two seasons after coming over in trade from Sacramento … Third in league in assists during regular season at 9.2 per game … Led league with 5.6-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio.

PASCAL SIAKAM

Won an NBA title with the Toronto Raptors in 2019 and now in second season with Pacers … Two-time All-NBA selection was named Eastern Conference Finals MVP … Averaged 20.2 points and 6.9 boards a game during regular season.

STORYLINES

Dominating the East

On their way to a 68-win regular season — the fifth-most wins in NBA history — the Thunder went 29-1 against the Eastern Conference this year. The only blemish was a Dec. 17 loss against the Milwaukee Bucks. OKC went 2-0 against the Pacers, including a 21-point rout in Indianapolis in March.

Winning a title

Either a long title drought will end — sort of — or one team will win its first NBA title. A Finals win would give the Thunder the franchise's first title since 1979, when they were the Seattle Supersonics. The Pacers have never won the NBA title and are making their first Finals appearance since 2000.

Strength on strength

The Pacers have one of the league's most efficient offenses, leading the league and have been even better in the postseason, increasing their offensive efficiency from 115.5 points per possession in the regular season to 117.7 points in the playoffs. The Thunder led the NBA in defensive rating during the regular season, and have improved in the postseason, from 106.6 points to 104.7 points per 100 possessions.

HEAD TO HEAD

REGULAR SEASON

OKC		IND
120.5	PPG	117.4
44.8	REB	41.8
26.9	ASST	29.2
11.7	TO	13.2
48.2	FG%	48.8
37.4	3P%	36.8
81.9	FT%	78.9

Indiana Pacers center Myles Turner holds the trophy as players celebrate after winning Game 6 of the Eastern Conference finals of the NBA basketball playoffs against the New York Knicks in Indianapolis, Saturday.

Thunder, Pacers seeking first title

ZACK WRIGHT
CNHI SPORTS OKLAHOMA

This time last year, both the Thunder and the Pacers were watching the NBA Finals from home, entering their respective offseasons with young rosters poised to burst onto the scene.

Now, Oklahoma City and Indiana have cruised their way to a clash of stylistic matchups for a chance to bring the Larry O'Brien Championship home to their respective cities for the first time.
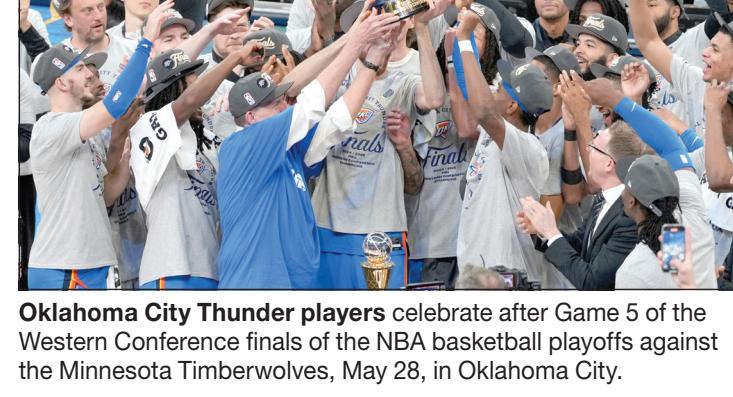
The Thunder, who posted a franchise-best 68-14 record in the regular season, has excelled all season long thanks to an MVP season from All-NBA guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and a relentless, suffocating effort on defense.

OKC led the league in turnovers per game (16.3) and defensive rating (106.6) during the regular season, with the latter stat improving to 104.7 points per 100 possessions in the postseason.

"Oklahoma City has been dominant all year long. Defensively, they're historically great, and they have all kinds of guys that can score," said Pacers coach Rick Carlisle. "And they have the MVP — that's always an important thing."

Indiana, on the other hand, made an impressive run to the Finals, losing just four games in series victories over the Bucks, Cavaliers and Knicks to claim the crown in the Eastern Conference.

Led by All-NBA guard Tyrese Haliburton, the Pacers rely on their depth of young contributors off the bench to push the game's pace for the full 48 minutes. In doing so, Indiana can come back from near insurmountable leads, a feat the ECF Champs accomplished in stunning fashion three separate times this postseason.

Oklahoma City Thunder players celebrate after Game 5 of the Western Conference finals of the NBA basketball playoffs against the Minnesota Timberwolves, May 28, in Oklahoma City.

"You have to battle-up in some of these games — they've had to do that, and we've had to do that," Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said. "Both teams are coming into the Finals with the same psychological profile right now. They're highly connected, and more connected now than they were at the beginning of the playoffs… So it becomes about who can play better in the games."

With both teams on historic runs, it will be interesting to see how their similar styles of play match up against one another. But one thing is for certain — Indiana needs an incredible effort from its bench and supporting staff to limit, or at least slow, OKC's big three.

Although Gilgeous-Alexander rightfully draws most of the attention on defense, the MVP has co-stars Jalen Williams and Chet Holmgren to lean on when defenses make stopping him the focal point. Guards Cason Wallace and Alex Caruso can also knock down shots and bring an All-NBA intensity on defense off the bench, so the Pacers will have their hands full no matter who is on the court for the Thunder.

Similar to Oklahoma City, Carlisle often rotates 10 players off the bench, relying not only on Haliburton but contributors such as Obi Toppin, Benedict Mathurin and Ben Sheppard to provide a spark and push the pace with fresh legs.

OKC is the heavy favorite (-700) in many sportsbooks to bring the trophy back to OKC. Haliburton and the Pacers have proved doubters wrong with historic comebacks all postseason, though, which they will hope to continue despite the odds stacked against them.

"We got our work cut out for us — playing against the MVP, playing against one of the best offenses in the league, the best team in the league — so we have to be prepared next series," said Haliburton after Indiana's game six victory.

Gilgeous-Alexander had a similar take ahead of the series, giving the Pacers their flowers for consistently championing a fast style of play.

"They're stubborn in the way that they play. They play [fast] no matter the game, environment, round or stage — they play to their identity. That's why they've been really good," he said. "They impose their will on teams. Now it's just about us being able to impose our will."

TELEVISION SCHEDULE

All games on ABC

Thursday
Game 1, Indiana at Oklahoma City
8:30 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

Sunday
Game 2, Indiana at Oklahoma City
8 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

June 11
Game 3, Oklahoma City at Indiana
8:30 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

June 13
Game 4, Oklahoma City at Indiana
8:30 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

*June 16
Game 5, Indiana at Oklahoma City
8:30 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

*June 19
Game 6, Oklahoma City at Indiana
8:30 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

*June 22
Game 7, Indiana at Oklahoma City
8:30 p.m. EDT/7:30 p.m. CDT

* - if necessary

PATH TO THE FINALS

INDIANA PACERS
Regular season: 50-32, 2nd in Central
Seed: Fourth
First round: Beat Milwaukee, 4-1
Second round: Beat Cleveland, 4-1
Conference Finals: Beat New York, 4-2

OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER
Regular season: 68-14, 1st in Northwest
Seed: First
First round: Beat Memphis, 4-0
Second round: Beat Denver, 4-3
Conference Finals: Beat Minnesota, 4-1

NBA CHAMPIONS

2023-24: Boston Celtics def. Dallas Mavericks, 4-1
2022-23: Denver Nuggets def. Miami Heat, 4-1
2021-22: Golden State Warriors def. Boston Celtics, 4-2
2020-21: Milwaukee Bucks def. Phoenix Suns, 4-2
2019-20: Los Angeles Lakers def. Miami Heat, 4-2
2018-19: Toronto Raptors def. Golden State Warriors, 4-2
2017-18: Golden State Warriors def. Cleveland Cavaliers, 4-0
2016-17: Golden State Warriors def. Cleveland Cavaliers, 4-1
2015-16: Cleveland Cavaliers def. Golden State Warriors, 4-3
2014-15: Golden State Warriors def. Cleveland Cavaliers, 4-2
2013-14: San Antonio Spurs def. Miami Heat, 4-1
2012-13: Miami Heat def. San Antonio Spurs, 4-3
2011-12: Miami Heat def. Oklahoma City Thunder, 4-1
2010-11: Dallas Mavericks def. Miami Heat, 4-2
2009-10: Los Angeles Lakers def. Boston Celtics, 4-3
2008-09: Los Angeles Lakers def. Orlando Magic, 4-1
2007-08: Boston Celtics def. Los Angeles Lakers, 4-2
2006-07: San Antonio Spurs def. Cleveland Cavaliers, 4-0
2005-06: Miami Heat def. Dallas Mavericks, 4-2
2004-05: San Antonio Spurs def. Detroit Pistons, 4-3
2003-04: Detroit Pistons def. Los Angeles Lakers, 4-1
2002-03: San Antonio Spurs def. New Jersey Nets, 4-2
2001-02: Los Angeles Lakers def. New Jersey Nets, 4-0
2000-01: Los Angeles Lakers def. Philadelphia 76ers, 4-1

NBA FINALS MVP

2023-24: Jaylen Brown, Boston Celtics
2022-23: Nikola Jokic, Denver Nuggets
2021-22: Stephen Curry, Golden State Warriors
2020-21: Giannis Antetokounmpo, Milwaukee Bucks
2019-20: LeBron James, Los Angeles Lakers
2018-19: Kawhi Leonard, Toronto Raptors
2017-18: Kevin Durant, Golden State Warriors
2016-17: Kevin Durant, Golden State Warriors
2015-16: LeBron James, Cleveland Cavaliers
2014-15: Andre Iguodala, Golden State Warriors
2013-14: Kawhi Leonard, San Antonio Spurs
2012-13: LeBron James, Miami Heat
2011-12: LeBron James, Miami Heat
2010-11: Dirk Nowitzki, Dallas Mavericks
2009-10: Kobe Bryant, Los Angeles Lakers
2008-09: Kobe Bryant, Los Angeles Lakers
2007-08: Paul Pierce, Boston Celtics
2006-07: Tony Parker, San Antonio Spurs
2005-06: Dwyane Wade, Miami Heat
2004-05: Tim Duncan, San Antonio Spurs
2003-04: Chauncey Billups, Detroit Pistons
2002-03: Tim Duncan, San Antonio Spurs
2001-02: Shaquille O'Neal, Los Angeles Lakers
2000-01: Shaquille O'Neal, Los Angeles Lakers