



Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander elevated his game to an MVP level in his sixth NBA season, with the 25-year-old Canadian averaging 30.1 points, 6.2 assists and 2.0 steals. CHRISTINE MURCH / The Canadian Press and Associated Press

Leading by example

By ANTHONY SLATER

Inside the evolving leadership style of the Thunder's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, one of the NBA's next-up stars.

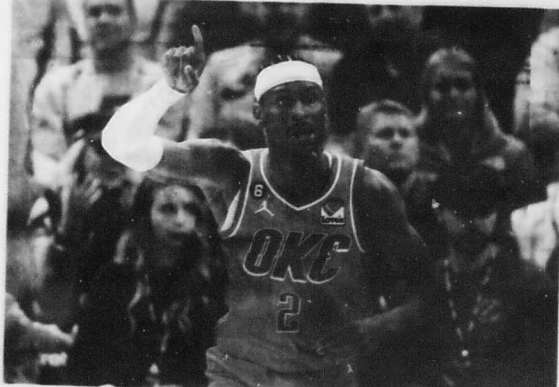
Oklahoma City » The strict sideline instruction from Oklahoma City Thunder coach Mark Daigneault did not include an immediate double-team of Kyrie Irving out past half court, no matter how scary Irving can be in the closing moments of a playoff game. On Monday night, in Game 4, desperately trying to even their second round series with the Dallas Mavericks, the Thunder went up three, with 9.1 seconds left. Daigneault called for the foul up three strategy — let a little clock tick, but make sure to intentionally grab an offensive rebound before the clock gets to zero, potential game-tying 3 up toward the basket. Turn it into a free-throw game.

Here's the issue: The Thunder had two rookies in their closing lineup and employ the youngest rotation in the league. They only have two total playoff points from anybody over the age of 25. They expect an understandable amount of growing pains. This is the first inning of what they believe can be a nine-inning, decade-long run in the playoff quarter for this infant core. Cason Wallace, along with Chet Holmgren, was the second rookie on the floor with their season on the line. He's a sharp but ambitious defender, thirsty to bound the league's best scorers. On this particular possession, he got too thirsty. Jake Williams had Irving under control 5.5 feet from the rim. Wallace had a different assignment.

"Duh was right there, about to foul," Shai Gilgeous-Alexander said. "Cason went to double-team, left somebody open. P.J. Washington, who has been shooting the pass out the ball. So I was very confused." Meet the Thunder's best player, but also their loudest on-court leader, if the situation calls. Gilgeous-Alexander is 25, but already finishing his sixth NBA season. He's been on two franchises and part of three playoff teams. He's been traded, absorbed a rebuild and built himself into an MVP candidate on the top seed. His experience and ability gives him stature in the Thunder's locker room. His work ethic and attention to detail have set the tone.

As Gilgeous-Alexander was explaining the Wallace mix-up, Williams temporarily interrupted, reminding him not to publicly reveal too much strategy. Gilgeous-Alexander shrugged it off. He's the vet. He knows what and what shouldn't be shared with the press.

"This is common knowledge," he said. Irving read the early double and lobbed it over the top to Washington, who at the time was 19 of 37 on 3s in the series. This is trouble,



Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander celebrates after scoring during the second half of a game against the Utah Jazz on April 6, 2023, at the Delta Center. Gilgeous-Alexander had 22 points in OKC's 114-98 win. RICK BOWMER / Associated Press

a fire that needs extinguishing before it becomes the biggest mistake of OKC's season.

Gilgeous-Alexander spots it. He runs off his man in the corner and grabs Washington before he can get in his shooting motion. The foul call comes late, but it comes. The save basically sealed the Thunder's 100-94 win in Game 4. Gilgeous-Alexander spent the initial moments after the whistle in dialogue with the official, pointing to the exact spot on the floor he committed the foul, ensuring that it came on the ground before Washington got a pass off to the corner. Then, once confirmed, he turned his attention to Wallace, lighting into the rookie in front of the world for the mistake. It wasn't costly, but it could've been and might be if it is repeated in the future.

"I apologized to Cason after," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "I felt bad. Because he does nothing wrong all game and the one time he does something wrong, I yell at him. But we're good."

This is a brief peek into the evolving leadership style of a star player who could be capturing a defining NBA team the next half-decade plus. He's smooth and calm on the surface, a new husband and father, a generous lead-by-example type in private but increasingly willing to scold

and instruct when necessary.

Holmgren might've explained it best the day after Game 1 of this series. The night before, he was guarding some Irving high-screen action to close the third quarter. As Daniel Gafford, his man, set the screen, Holmgren sat way too deep in his drop coverage, allowing Irving to step into a 3 at the buzzer.

Holmgren dropped his head as soon as it swished. Gilgeous-Alexander shouted at him as they entered the timeout huddle.

"I didn't know the clock situation," Holmgren said. "So he's yelling at me. All he could do is shoot it. I wasn't up."

Holmgren still has a level of anguish on his face about the mistake, even though the Thunder won. "I knew I f—ed up," he said. "He didn't have to tell me. But he got on me. Which is ... accountability. He comes in here every day and sets the example. He's not going to get mad at anybody for something he's not out there doing at the same time."

But Holmgren has a qualifier, using a legendary Kobe Bryant story he'd heard from Lou Williams on a podcast to differentiate.

"He's super chill," Holmgren said. "Usually it's just kind of talking us through mistakes. He's not in here reigning like Kobe (Bryant) was. He's not the type of guy who'd take

his (signature) shoes away because he doesn't want us wearing them. That's not him."

Bonding with Chris Paul

Chris Paul, a renowned communicator who is a fan of the phone call over the text message, picks up just after getting off the other line with Gilgeous-Alexander. They'd spent some time talking about life and basketball, including the schematics defining this Dallas series.

"We talk hoop all the time," Paul said.

Gilgeous-Alexander didn't tell Paul he'd zinged Holmgren for sagging too far back on the Irving jumper, but Paul was pleased to hear about it from a reporter. Paul has yelled at a center or two in his time for a mistake.

"I'm glad," Paul said. "That's big." Then he laughed. "I mean ... he got to see it."

Paul's 15th NBA season lined up with Gilgeous-Alexander's second. Gilgeous-Alexander was traded from the LA Clippers to the Thunder on July 6, 2019. The NBA world was in Las Vegas for summer league at the time. Paul, then on the Houston Rockets, ran into Gilgeous-Alexander and told him the Thunder situation would be great for him.

"Little did I know ..." Paul said.

Because of his time in Los Angeles, Paul is close to Clippers trainer Jasen Powell. When Gilgeous-Alexander was a rookie, Powell told Paul he loved the young guard's demeanor and professionalism. He worked and cared about the game. Paul took note from afar.

But then Thunder general manager Sam Presti brought them together. The Paul George trade from OKC to the Clippers triggered the early stages of a roster reset. Five days later, the Thunder traded Russell Westbrook to the Rockets for Paul and draft-pick compensation.

Fourteen years apart in age, Paul and Gilgeous-Alexander now shared a backcourt together, often placed in three-guard lineups with Dennis Schröder. Daigneault, then a young assistant on Billy Donovan's staff, is still seeing the defensive flowers bloom from all of Gilgeous-Alexander's time that season defending wings and shouldering key assignments for a playoff team.

"He had to guard up," Daigneault said. "He was basically a (small forward) when we played those guys together and the other guy out there was (Dimitris) Salimoglou. It wasn't like he was taking major matchups. So Shai was guarding real guys."

This season, COVID-19 hit. The Thunder were about to tip off an important March game against the Utah Jazz for the third seed when Rudy Gobert's test came back positive, shutting the world down. The league picked up in the Orlando bubble in July, a secluded environment at a lonely time.

This was already Paul's first season away from his family on a daily basis. They didn't move with him to Oklahoma City. So during home-stands, he spent a ton of time with Gilgeous-Alexander, Luguentz Dort and Darius Bazley. Paul and Gilgeous-Alexander wanted to G League games together to watch Dort play. Gilgeous-Alexander joined him on a couple flights back to Los Angeles to see Paul's family.

In the bubble, Paul, Bazley and Gilgeous-Alexander would pile into a room together to watch basketball on off-nights. They'd discuss strategy and then translate those basketball lessons to the court in Orlando. Paul remembers a game where the opposing team brought its big men up to the level of the screen, guarding Gilgeous-Alexander.

"Most of these young guys in the league only know drop defense," Paul said. "It was funny, man. Shai in that Canadian accent, 'C, what do I do?' We talked about shows. The low man is going to be here, look at the corner, all that stuff. Now you watch him and he's just so comfortable with his game."

Photo by GILGEIOUS-ALEXANDER, CT