



80s Era NBA + 40: Part Fourteen

Celtics defeat Lakers in the 1984 Finals

By Michael Hamel

May 27, 1984

NBA Finals Game 1

Los Angeles 115, Boston 109

In the most anticipated NBA Finals opener in years (Jerry West compared it to the “opening of a great play”¹), and the first Celtics-Lakers Finals game since 1969, the Lakers used a 19-3 first quarter run to take a 22-7 lead and ran the Celtics out of the Boston Garden. Pat Riley later called it “as good a period as we’ve ever played in a big game,”² as Los Angeles shot 16 for 22 while running their fast break to perfection. The Celtics had been lulled into complacency on defense after having played three straight half-court teams in the playoffs (Washington, New York and Milwaukee) but the Lakers were playing at a more dizzying tempo.³ Boston regained their composure and kept pace in the second quarter, but a three-pointer by Michael Cooper at the buzzer restored a thirteen point Lakers edge at the half. Los Angeles’ defense was just as impressive as their offense; Larry Bird and Robert Parish combined to make just four field goals in the first half, the latter being outscored 23-5 by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. “They threw caution to the wind,” Cedric Maxwell said later. “We were the team that sat back and read our press clippings and heard about how good we were.”⁴

In the third quarter the Lakers built a 73-54 advantage while Parish was on the bench in foul trouble, but the Celtics rallied. Bird nailed a buzzer-beating three-pointer of his own to close a 14-3 run that got Boston within four at 92-88. Los Angeles immediately retook control with four fast break baskets, including Jamaal Wilkes’s only basket of the night following a successful layup by Parish. The sequence had not added much to the Lakers lead on the scoreboard (100-94) but was a psychological knockout blow. Boston never seriously threatened again.

May 31, 1984

NBA Finals Game 2

Boston 124, Los Angeles 121 (ot)

Game 2 was a game of giveaways. First, Boston gave away a thirteen point lead. Then Kevin McHale gave away a golden chance to tie the game with twenty seconds left in regulation by missing two free throws. But James Worthy and Magic Johnson trumped those transgressions with a pair of misplays that allowed the Celtics to tie the series.

The Lakers weathered an early surge by the Celtics, who desperately needed to earn a split at home before heading to Los Angeles for Game 3, and used a 13-2 run to get back in the game. In the third quarter, an 11-2 streak by Los Angeles, powered completely by the scoring of James Worthy and Michael Cooper, put the Lakers in front 85-82. The game remained close into the fourth, and Cedric Maxwell was pressed into duty guarding Magic after Dennis Johnson fouled out. In the final minute, Magic made two free throws to give Los Angeles a 113-111 lead.

Then came McHale’s missed free throws. After the second miss, the Lakers called timeout, which Pat Riley later admitted was a mistake. “I don’t ordinarily do that. I like to have the floor scattered instead of set in a situation like that,”⁵ Riley explained, referring to how his timeout had given Boston a chance to organize their defense. Worthy then made the inbound pass into the backcourt to Magic, who was guarded by Bird and immediately double-teamed by McHale, who had been covering Worthy on the sideline. Magic gave the ball back to Worthy—

the only open man—and when Ainge drifted over from Bryon Scott to pick up the Lakers sophomore, Worthy attempted a cross-court lob pass to Scott. Gerald Henderson had read the play and was ready. “I don’t think Byron saw me coming,” Henderson said later, after he had intercepted the pass and drove in for a layup to tie the game with thirteen seconds left. “Nobody saw me coming. I couldn’t wait for the pass to be released. I had to be in a position to steal it. I’m sure Worthy thought he was wide open. I couldn’t understand why he just sort of threw it soft.”⁶ Then Magic compounded the error by dribbling out the clock before the Lakers even attempted a game-winning shot.

In overtime, the Lakers had the ball with a 118-115 lead (a possession that ended with a missed hook by Abdul-Jabbar) and were still in front at 121-120 before Scott Wedman made a jumper from the corner to put the Celtics ahead for good. Parish sealed the outcome by stripping the ball from Bob McAdoo; Bird ended up with the ball, was fouled, and made two free throws to complete the scoring.

June 3, 1984

NBA Finals Game 3

Los Angeles 137, Boston 104

The Lakers began the game on an 18-4 run, followed by 18 unanswered points in the second quarter after the Celtics had regrouped to close the gap, before delivering a Finals-record 47-point knockout outburst in the third. Los Angeles led 104-79 at the end of that period, then extended their lead in garbage time as both sides emptied their benches; only five players on either side logged thirty or more minutes. Magic Johnson set another Finals record with 21 assists and was jubilant after the game. “It’s a great feeling when you’re running like that because you feel like you can’t be stopped ... When we can make ‘em turn it over or take a shot they didn’t want to take, we’re gone.”⁷ Larry Bird was more succinct, saying, “We played like sissies,” before elaborating, “I can’t believe a team like this would let LA come out and push us around like they did. Today I didn’t feel we played hard. We got beat bad, and it’s very embarrassing.”⁸ Boston was reeling, and if not for Henderson’s steal in Game 2, the series might be all but over, as the Lakers seemed capable of running the Celtics off the floor whenever they chose to do so. “They’re relentless,” lamented Celtics assistant coach Chris Ford. “The only guy they have who doesn’t run the floor is Kareem, and the more fast-break layups they get, the less work he has to do. Then he’s rested at the end of the game and they can go to him.”⁹

June 6, 1984

NBA Finals Game 4

Boston 129, Los Angeles 125 (ot)

The Lakers outshot the Celtics 59 to 43 percent from the floor, while making two more field goals than the men in green, and held their own on the boards (52-46 in favor of Boston), but missed 14 of 39 free throws which proved costly. However, what turned around this game—and the series—could not be measured by statistics. Boston brought a better defensive game plan, abandoning the questionable strategy of playing Henderson on Magic Johnson in pursuit of a supposed quickness advantage, and instead unleashed Dennis Johnson, who smothered Magic in the second half.¹⁰ The move also reinvigorated D.J.’s offensive game, in spite of the Lakers continued use of the much taller James Worthy to guard him.

Boston also brought a more physical edge, which showed itself on a number of occasions. The first quarter was fast paced and tight until the Lakers pulled ahead by ten at 31-21. But with Abdul-Jabbar and Worthy on the bench, the Lakers bogged down on offense, and the Celtics ran off eleven in a row to take the lead. Los Angeles fought back, scoring eight in a row, and then, with Magic and Bird both resting, extended their run to 16-1 and led by 14. The lead stayed around ten points the rest of the half, but the game began to descend into the slower, more

physical style that suited the Celtics. With a minute-and-a-half left in the second quarter, Cooper scored on a layup that sent him stumbling along the sideline. Bird got the ball and prepared to inbound it, but Cooper, in his rush to get back on the court, chose a route that caused him to get tangled up with Bird. Instead of trying to avoid further contact, Bird deliberately backed into Cooper, and kept backing into him until Cooper fell head over heels into the laps of the photographers sitting courtside. It was a sign of things to come.

Lineup Analysis¹¹

In the second and third quarter of Game 4 of the 1984 Finals, the Lakers used a 16-1 run to build a fourteen point lead, but lost it as the Celtics turned up their defensive pressure. The charts that follow show who was on the court during these key moments, and illustrate a few key points:

First, it is easy to see that the Celtics had switched to using Dennis Johnson on Magic instead of Gerald Henderson, while Worthy spent most of his time guarding D.J. on the other end of the floor. “I played a lot of perimeter defense on small forwards this year,” Worthy said during the series. “Dennis Johnson is essentially a guard with a small forward’s offensive game.”¹² The strategy mostly worked, as D.J., a 43.7% shooter during the regular season, was held to 40% or less in every game of the Finals except for a 10 for 20 outing in Game 5. But D.J. scored 22, 22, 20 and 22 points in the last four games and came within seven points of equaling Worthy’s production in those contests (30,22,20,21).

Second Quarter Game 4 1984 Finals

Lakers ball	McAdoo	McAdoo	McAdoo	Wilkes	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy
	Wilkes	Wilkes	Wilkes	McAdoo	Wilkes	Rambis	Rambis	Rambis
	Nater	Nater	Nater	Nater	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar
	Scott	Scott	Scott	Scott	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper
	Magic	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper	Magic	Magic	Magic	Magic
Boston	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell
	Bird	McHale	McHale	Bird	Bird	Bird	Bird	Bird
	McHale	Parish	Parish	Parish	Parish	Parish	Parish	McHale
	Wedman	Wedman	Wedman	Wedman	Ainge	Ainge	Wedman	Carr
	Buckner	Buckner	D. J.	D. J.	D. J.	D. J.	D. J.	D. J.
Celtics ball	Wilkes	Wilkes	Wilkes	McAdoo	Worthy	Rambis	Rambis	Rambis
	McAdoo	McAdoo	McAdoo	Wilkes	Wilkes	Cooper	Worthy	Worthy
	Nater	Nater	Nater	Nater	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar
	Scott	Cooper	Scott	Scott	Magic	Magic	Cooper	Magic
	Magic	Scott	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper	Worthy	Magic	Cooper
Time Left	12:00	10:30	9:19	8:45	8:00	6:34	2:52	1:50
Score	33-32	39-32	43-33	47-33	47-38	51-40	61-50	62-54

Worthy had trouble with the passing game in this series, but was dominant on the offensive end. Oddly, his two best shooting nights were in the Lakers two overtime losses (11 for 12 in Game 2, 14 for 17 in Game 3). Worthy also regularly torched Bird in situations where a defensive switch left Bird guarding the much more athletic Worthy.

It is also worth noting that the Lakers 16-1 run came while Abdul-Jabbar was in foul trouble and the Celtics were playing the defensively-challenged duo of Bird and Wedman. Wilkes was still recovering from a stomach bug, backup center Swen Nater was hardly an offensive weapon, Magic rested for two-and-a-half minutes, and the Lakers still blew open the game. For Wedman, this was his last appearance in the Finals, as he was kneed in the leg by Michael Cooper early in this quarter and suffered a hairline fracture in his left fibula. His brief return at the 2:52 mark was fueled by adrenaline, but when Wedman was unable to run he asked to be taken out of the game.

Third Quarter Game 4 1984 Finals

Lakers ball	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy	
	Rambis	Rambis	McAdoo	Rambis	Rambis	
	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar	
	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper	Scott	
	Magic	Magic	Magic	Magic	Magic	
Boston	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	Maxwell	
	Bird	Bird	Bird	Bird	Bird	
	Parish	McHale	McHale	McHale	McHale	
	Henderson	Henderson	Henderson	Henderson	Henderson	
	D.J.	D.J.	D.J.	D.J.	D.J.	
Celtics ball	Rambis	Rambis	McAdoo	Rambis		
	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper	Cooper		
	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar	Jabbar		
	Magic	Magic	Magic	Magic		
	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy	Worthy		
Time Left	12:00	7:42	5:10	2:50	0:15	0:00
Score	68-58	74-67	79-74	82-80	90-88	90-88

With both starting lineups (for the most part) on the floor to end the second quarter, the Celtics crept closer. McHale’s clothesline of Rambis took place just seconds after the substitutions shown at 7:42 in the third quarter. The Lakers lineup during the third quarter features no player shorter than 6’7” which created mismatch problems for many opponents, including the Celtics. “You’ve got different defensive matchups than you normally would,” said Boston assistant coach Chris Ford after Game 1 of the series. “We had decided to have our people guard the same guy who was guarding them, but for some reason we didn’t seem to pick up our men well at all, and sometimes we were lost in the transition.”¹³ That strategy was also abandoned by this game, as these charts show.

With seven-and-a-half minutes left in the third, Boston had inched to within four, at 74-70. Then Abdul-Jabbar hit a hook to put the Lakers up by six; on the Celtics next possession he rebounded an unsuccessful jumper by D.J. and threw a long outlet pass to Worthy on the left baseline near the Lakers three-point line. As Henderson picked up Worthy, Kurt Rambis was streaking down the right sideline. Worthy threw an excellent touch pass to Rambis, but McHale closed from midcourt and took down Rambis with a clothesline move that sent the bespectacled forward sprawling into the photographers near the Celtics bench. (The freakish nature of Rambis’s tumble to the court was enhanced by a pair of wraps on his left arm that were connected by a cord in an attempt to protect a hyperextended elbow.¹⁴) Bird attempted to play sportsman, extending a hand to help Rambis up, but Rambis soon charged after McHale and both benches emptied as tempers—especially Cooper’s—flared up on both sides. The

Forum crowd began to chant “Boston Sucks” and would pick it up again a minute or so later when Bird and Abdul-Jabbar started jawing at each other after getting tangled up while going for a rebound. Pat Riley was predictably upset by McHale’s aggressive maneuver: “This changes the whole mood, and that’s the mood it’s going to be for the next three games,” he said later. “It was as blatant a cheap shot as I’ve ever seen.”¹⁵

The game was tight from this point forward. Midway through the fourth quarter, D.J. scored to give Boston their largest lead of the game at 101-99, but Los Angeles soon moved back in front with an 8-0 run. With fifty-six seconds left in regulation Magic made two free throws to extend the Lakers lead to 113-108, but Parish completed a three-point play seventeen seconds later, and on the next Lakers possession, Bird was fouled by Abdul-Jabbar. The foul was Kareem’s sixth, ending his night; Bird hit two free throws to tie the game. Then Parish intercepted a pass from Magic that was intended for Worthy, and Boston called timeout to set up a play. Bird missed a tough fallaway three-pointer, and then McHale missed a very makeable short jumper as the buzzer sounded.

In overtime, Magic had a chance to put the Lakers ahead with the score tied at 123-123 with thirty-five seconds left, but missed two free throws. Bird hit a turnaround jumper to put the Celtics in front, then an exchange of free throws made it 127-124 Boston before M.L. Carr added an exclamation point, stealing an inbounds pass by Worthy and slamming it home to the disgust of the Forum crowd.

June 8, 1984

NBA Finals Game 5

Boston 121, Los Angeles 103

It was 97 degrees on the court at game time in the non-air conditioned confines of the Boston Garden, and the Lakers wilted in the second half as the Celtics began the third quarter with a decisive 13-2 run. Bird was the best player on the floor in the eyes of Pat Riley, who later said that “[Bird] was just awesome. He made everything work. He was the catalyst, and that’s what happens when great players come to the front.”¹⁶ Yet Bird was not unaffected by the heat and humidity, which left him a bit dizzy at times and prompted the Celtics trainer to keep him wrapped with cool towels on the bench during breaks. (The reserves on both sides also took to fanning the regulars with towels during timeouts to try to provide some relief.) Referee Hugh Evans was less fortunate; he had to depart the Garden at halftime due to dehydration. Abdul-Jabbar, who needed oxygen on the bench, attempted to analogize the conditions after the game: “I suggest you go to the local steam bath with all your clothes on. First, try to do 100 pushups. Then run back and forth for 48 minutes.”¹⁷

Los Angeles led for most of the opening quarter, until D.J. hit a jumper with a minute-and-a-half left to give Boston a 24-23 lead. A 10-2 run put Boston ahead 38-30, but Los Angeles rallied to close within two at halftime. The second half belonged to the Celtics, who extended their lead to as many as 21 points in the fourth quarter.

June 10, 1984

NBA Finals Game 6

Los Angeles 119, Boston 108

The Lakers staved off elimination with an impressive 36-12 run in the second half that included seven straight missed shots by the Celtics. Bird had led Boston to a 65-58 halftime lead with 17 points and 10 rebounds, and then the Celtics scored the first ten points of the third quarter to shock the Forum crowd. After an exchange of baskets by Abdul-Jabbar and Dennis Johnson, it was 84-73 Boston and for a moment it looked like the Lakers would not be heading back to Boston for Game 7. But then came the Lakers 36-12 streak. “We made three adjustments,” Riley said after the game. “First, we simply rotated our guards more to stay fresher. Secondly, we wanted to exert

more pressure on the Celtics' guards by picking them up deeper. Third, we told our post people, 'You're on your own.' We only kept the double team on [Larry] Bird, and we stopped doubling the other Boston post men." ¹⁸

The Lakers also decided to inject some of their own physicality, beginning in the first quarter when James Worthy pushed Cedric Maxwell into the support under the Celtics basket to bring a Boston fast break to a crashing halt. It was a combination of payback for the McHale-Rambis altercation and Maxwell's flashing of the "choke sign" while Worthy was shooting (and missing) free throws late in Game 4.

Still, the game was tied 93-93 early in the fourth quarter before the Lakers landed the decisive blow, a 10-1 run (part of their 36-12 uprising) sparked by a Byron Scott three-pointer. The rookie's series-high 11-point performance off the bench was welcome news, especially since Bob McAdoo sat out the second half with an Achilles tendon injury.

June 12, 1984

NBA Finals Game 7

Boston 111, Los Angeles 102

Back in Boston, the Garden was a cooler 90 degrees and the humidity had lessened.¹⁹ But Cedric Maxwell was ready to heat up. Maxwell scored 17 in the first half, making 11 of 13 free throws as the Lakers seemed confused that he had become a focal point of the offense. Chris Ford later recalled that "Max said before the game—really, after the sixth game—'Just ride my shoulders, guys.' He was really determined. He wanted the ball."²⁰ Maxwell's aggressive streak was in stark contrast to the Lakers, who despite out-shooting the Celtics again (49 to 40 percent) were manhandled on the boards (52-33) and made just 18 of 28 free throws while the duo of Maxwell and Dennis Johnson combined to shoot 26 for 29 from the line by themselves.

Boston took the lead for good in the second quarter by scoring the first eight points of the period and led by six at the break. But the Lakers inched back within one, 73-72, on a reverse layup by Kurt Rambis with five minutes left in the third quarter. Boston then scored five in a row, as Abdul-Jabbar missed two free throws while Parish made a hook (a positive omen for the home team), and would later close the period on a 9-0 run, with Bird resting on the bench, to take a thirteen point lead to the fourth.

The advantage was still 99-85 Boston with 7:58 remaining, but the Lakers stormed back, and got to within 105-102 when Worthy hit a jumper from the left side with 1:15 left. Bird missed a fallaway, and Magic had the ball in his hands with a chance to tie. But Parish and McHale surrounded him, causing Magic to lose the ball. On the subsequent break Cooper fouled Dennis Johnson, who made both free throws to give Boston a five point lead with forty-five seconds on the clock. With Celtics fans crowding around (and over) the sidelines, the Lakers failed to score again, and a pair of free throws by Larry Bird closed out the scoring.

After the game, Pat Riley summarized the disappointing result. "I think they are the better team. They don't have the same kind of talent we have. They have equal talent, but it's made differently. In a game decided by aggressiveness and rebounding, their talent is better than ours. We have to hope our quickness gets the better of their size, and it did for a while, about 3-1/2 games. Then their size and power started to take control."²¹

Next Time: 1983-84 Season Review

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- ¹ Lazenby, Roland. *The Lakers: A Basketball Journey*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993, p244.
- ² Dan Shaughnessy, "Lakers Break Faster, 115-109," *Boston Globe*, May 28, 1984.
- ³ Bob Ryan, "News Analysis; Lakers Got Celtics On The Run," *Boston Globe*, May 28, 1984.
- ⁴ Dan Shaughnessy, "Lakers Break Faster, 115-109."
- ⁵ Dan Shaughnessy, "Celtics Notebook; Favorable Conditions In Forum," *Boston Globe*, June 3, 1984.
- ⁶ Dan Shaughnessy, "Reliving A Golden Fleece," *Boston Globe*, June 2, 1984. Also see: Leigh Montville, "Grand Theft Motto," by *Boston Globe*, June 1, 1984.
- ⁷ Dan Shaughnessy, "Celtics Break Down, 137-104," *Boston Globe*, June 4, 1984.
- ⁸ Dan Shaughnessy, "Celtics Break Down, 137-104."
- ⁹ Bob Ryan, "News Analysis; Simply, The Lakers Are Breaking Away," *Boston Globe*, June 4, 1984.
- ¹⁰ K.C. Jones later said that D.J. had not told him how disappointed he was in not getting to guard Magic until after K.C. announced the switch. "I wish D.J. had said something to me sooner. If he had, I would have let him take Magic." Bird, Larry and Magic Johnson with Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, p135.
- ¹¹ Game 4: Lineup analysis, and much of the rest of this section is drawn from watching Game 4 on the DVD collection *NBA Dynasty Series: Boston Celtics, The Complete History*. Also see Dan Shaughnessy, "Celtics Get Square In OT," *Boston Globe*, June 7, 1984.
- ¹² Dan Shaughnessy, "Celtics Notebook; Another Lengthy Pause Before Series Resumes," *Boston Globe*, June 1, 1984.
- ¹³ Bob Ryan, "News Analysis; Lakers Got Celtics On The Run."
- ¹⁴ Leigh Montville, "On Riley's Hair, Kareem's Goggles, Bird's Feet," *Boston Globe*, May 30, 1984. "The Lakers' power forward wears a bandage around his forearm and a bandage around the muscle on his upper arm. A cord runs between the two bandages. 'I suffered a hyperextended elbow a couple of months ago,' Rambis said. 'I didn't want to do it again, so a friend of mine who runs a muscle gym rigged up this thing. It keeps me from straightening out my arm.'"
- ¹⁵ Dan Shaughnessy, "Celtics Tactic Has Riley Riled," *Boston Globe*, June 8, 1984.
- ¹⁶ Dan Shaughnessy, "No Sweat For Celtics, 121-103; Bird Brings The Heat As LA Goes Cold," *Boston Globe*, June 9, 1984.
- ¹⁷ Dan Shaughnessy, "Garden Heat Cooked The Lakers' Fast Break," *Boston Globe*, June 9, 1984.
- ¹⁸ Bob Ryan, "News Analysis; Lakers' Tuning Stopped Celtics' Hum," *Boston Globe*, June 11, 1984. Also see: Dan Shaughnessy, "Now, It's Really The Best of Seven; Celtics Freeze Up In Game 6, 119-108," *Boston Globe*, June 11, 1984.
- ¹⁹ Game 7: much of this section is drawn from watching Game 7 on the DVD collection *NBA Dynasty Series: Boston Celtics, The Complete History*.
- ²⁰ Bob Ryan, "News Analysis; He Gave a Maximum Effort; Cedric Rose to the Occasion for Celtics in Final Game," *Boston Globe*, June 12, 1984.
- ²¹ Dan Shaughnessy, "It's Another Banner Year: Celtics Hoist Flag No. 15," *Boston Globe*, June 13, 1984.