

[News](#)



Dallas Mavericks coach Jason Kidd, left, will face Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla in the 2024 NBA Finals. which begins Thursday night in Boston. (VAVEL/MSR)

Nate Tinner-Williams

[View Author Profile](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

June 6, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The NBA Finals kick off on Thursday night, making history as the first matchup in nearly half a century between two Black head coaches vying for the top crown in basketball. Both this year have a connection to the Catholic Church.

The Celtics, led by a devout Catholic in [Joe Mazzulla](#), are seeking a record-setting twelfth championship and their first since 2008. The number-one overall seed in the 2024 playoffs, they will face the upstart Dallas Mavericks, a five-seed in the Western Conference seeking their second title overall.

The Mavs' coach, Hall of Famer [Jason Kidd](#), is the son of an Irish Catholic and, like Mazzulla, a Catholic school grad. Both are seeking their first title as a head coach; Kidd won with Dallas as a starting point guard in 2011, the franchise's only championship.

The matchup this year is punctuated by shifting league narratives, with a resurgent [Luka Dončić](#) teaming with former champion [Kyrie Irving](#) this year to bring Dallas to heights not seen since the era of their German import superstar [Dirk Nowitzki](#). The Celtics, often pegged as underachieving with the leading young duo of [Jaylen Brown](#) and [Jayson Tatum](#), have returned to the Finals after a disappointing loss to the Golden State Warriors in 2022.

Only two rotation players in this year's matchup have previously won titles: the offensive-minded shooting guard Irving and the Celtics' defensive stalwart point guard [Jrue Holiday](#).

"It takes everything. I literally say it takes everything," Holiday recently said of his 2021 title with the Milwaukee Bucks.

"It's one of the hardest things that I've ever done. Mentally, physically, you're exhausted... It's about executing, but I think for me the biggest thing was about how exhausted I was because I left everything out there."

Like Mazzulla, Holiday is an outspoken Christian who has openly anchored his performance in sports with his faith in God—especially the ability to maintain steadiness under challenging circumstances. He famously missed part of the 2016-17 NBA season to care for his wife following her diagnosis of a brain tumor, an experience he has described as an opportunity to "start to seek God more."

Advertisement

Mazzulla, who spoke about his Catholic faith in an interview with Sports Spectrum earlier this season, similarly spoke of the power of relying on divine providence.

"My wife and I and our family have tried to just... be where God wants [us] to be," he said. "Everything that comes your way has the opportunity to help you in some capacity."

Apparently God wants the 35-year-old head coach at the top of the basketball world, less than two years removed from a scandal that left Boston's then-head coach [Ime Udoka](#) on the outs and Mazzulla in the driver's seat. He guided the Celtics this year to a dominant wire-to-wire performance across the season, losing only two games thus far in the playoffs.

Kidd, on the other hand, has been a head coach for over a decade but without playoff success at the helm until his time in Dallas. His ability to corral tough personalities has brought the likes of Irving to his first Finals appearance since 2017, following years of bizarre behavior and on-court friction before being traded to the Mavs. Their playoff journey has featured two six-game series before a gentleman's sweep in the conference finals.

The Finals matchup this week will be the first to feature two Black head coaches since [K. C. Jones'](#) Washington Bullets faced [Al Attles'](#) Golden State Warriors in 1975. Attles, a Black Catholic, led his team to a 4-0 sweep for the franchise's third championship.

The Mavs and Celtics will tip off on Thursday night at TD Garden in Boston at 8:30pm ET. The game will air live on ABC, the ESPN website, and in the ESPN app.