

INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA – OCTOBER 23: Jimmy Butler #22 of the Miami Heat dribbles the ball while being ... [+] guarded by T.J. McConnell #9 of the Indiana Pacers in the third quarter at Gainbridge Fieldhouse on October 23, 2021 in Indianapolis, Indiana. (Photo by Dylan Buell/Getty Images)

Getty Images

The Indiana Pacers, thanks to numerous losses in close games, are off to a slow start. With several injuries at play and a new coaching staff establishing a new system at the same time, it isn't stunning to see the team sitting at 4-7. However, the Pacers had higher hopes for themselves than their current sitting in the standings.

The team is trending up recently — they have won three of their last four games and only have one forgettable performance all season long — which has many optimistic about where Indiana is headed. But one problem that has hindered the blue and gold for years has continued early in this season, and it figures to be one that plagues the franchise going forward, unless they can find effective solutions.

The Pacers struggle mightily to defend big, muscular forwards.

This issue has lingered in Indiana for the last few seasons. It seems like an almost weekly occurrence now where one player of this archetype kills the Pacers defense. Just this season, in a mere 11 games, players such as OG Anunoby, Gordon Hayward, Kyle Kuzma, Khris Middleton, and Robert Covington have scored well over their season average against the blue and gold. Most of those players are talented on a nightly basis, but they still exceeded their typical level of play against the Pacers.

“Guarding guys like that, that are so good one-on-one, it's hard to really stop them. They're going to get to their spots, that's what they do,” Pacers forward Oshae Brissett detailed. Brissett has often been tasked with defending these players when he is in the game.

In order to solve this problem, the Pacers need to figure out why they have it in the first place. One sizeable reason why the team has been unable to contain this archetype of player in recent seasons is based on personnel. The team had a good answer for stronger forwards when Thaddeus Young was on the roster, but he left for Chicago in the 2019 offseason, and the blue and gold didn't bring in anyone that could replicate his defensive skills at the time.

Justin Holiday is a solid defender in general, but he lacks the strength necessary to effectively slow down bulkier perimeter players. The same issue makes Brissett a flawed option. In addition to this, the Pacers start Domantas Sabonis and Myles Turner together in the frontcourt, so one of them is naturally going to defend a forward for portions of each game. That often leaves them matched up with guys who fit the description of a player that has dominated the Pacers in recent seasons. Turner is one of the best defenders in the league around the basket, and Sabonis is decent near the rim, but both are too slow to consistently keep up with big forwards who have perimeter skills.

Since Young departed, Indiana has also deployed Doug McDermott and JaKarr Sampson as frontcourt players, and while Sampson was a decent stopgap defensive option, neither of those two could contain robust forwards.

So personnel is a big factor in the Pacers' struggles in this area. In the two seasons prior to this one, they had very few consistent answers when opponents put a sturdy perimeter player into the game, and it showed.

Another factor in the team's struggles defending players of this mold is strategic. The two Pacers head coaches from the prior two seasons, Nate McMillan and Nate Bjorkgren, each had different defensive styles — McMillan's teams played a more reserved defense while Bjorkgren's squads were more aggressive. Both schemes had their strengths and weaknesses, and no coach has figured out the perfect defensive strategy. But both coaches contributed to their team's failures in defending larger wings.

McMillan's units played great team defense, which can work in preventing big scoring nights from the types of players that the Pacers have struggled stopping. But those same players are typically hyper-aware in a way that allows them to find the weakness in a helping, rotated defense, and that often still concedes big passing nights from those players. Jaylen Brown, Rondae Hollis-Jefferson, Kevin Love, and Troy Brown all posted their highest assists in a single game number against the Pacers during the 2019-20 season, McMillan's last as head coach in Indiana.

Bjorkgren, on the other hand, deployed a more aggressive scheme that left Pacers players defending strapping forwards in one-on-one settings. This led to season-high scoring nights from the likes of Mikal Bridges, Marvin Bagley, and Harrison Barnes — good players to be certain, but not names that anyone expects to put up 30+ points in a game.

This year, Rick Carlisle coaches the Pacers. And he is trying to solve both the personnel and strategic issues that have befallen the blue and gold against larger wings. But it's challenging.

The Pacers tweaked their roster this offseason and brought in Torrey Craig, a hard-nosed defender with four prior years of experience making life tough on his opponents. "I take all the pride in the world on being a defender," Craig said this offseason. "I don't even like guys to score one basket."

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA – OCTOBER 20: Gordon Hayward #20 of the Charlotte Hornets shoots against ... [+] Torrey Craig #13 of the Indiana Pacers during their game at Spectrum Center on October 20, 2021 in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Hornets won 123-122. (Photo by Grant Halverson/Getty Images)

Getty Images

Craig didn't see much time early in the season, and he played under seven minutes in the Pacers fourth game. In their fifth game, against Toronto, Anunoby scored 25 points, 16 of which came in the

first quarter, and Craig didn't play until the final frame. Indiana's struggles against the Raptors may have changed something, because Craig has played over 22 minutes per contest since that night.

Individually, Craig's defense has been wonderful for his new team this season. His defensive field goal percentage, a stat NBA.com produces that is intended to measure how well/poorly opposing players shoot when guarded by a certain player, [is 41.1%](#). That's a great figure, and he causes opponents to miss about 6% more of their shots than they would on an average night.

Those results have helped the Pacers somewhat against strong frontcourt players. NBA tracking data shows that All-NBA forward Julius Randle shot 2/8 when defended by Craig, for example. Hayward was 5/11 in these circumstances. Craig is already making his impact felt as a defensive presence, and it's helping solve one of the team's biggest problems.

"He's going to be great defensively," Pacers guard Malcolm Brogdon said of Craig in training camp. "He guards one through five."

Beyond the addition of Craig, the Pacers are also trying to slow down these powerful wings with a refined strategy. Like Brissett said, the Pacers are trying to avoid defending these players one-on-one and are instead trying to make it a team effort.

"[We've] just got to be better together, and play better team defense," Brissett said of defending guys who fit this archetype. "Being better defensively, as a team, showing more help and being in our gaps, something that can definitely help."

Despite the change in approach and roster refinements, though, the Pacers will likely still struggle in this area. Craig can't play for entire games, and following through with the minutiae that Brissett explained will still leave holes in the defense elsewhere. In general, defending players who are strong and tall is hard.

"We had problems with the same guys in Dallas," Carlisle explained, noting that these large wings are just good players in general. "We've just got to get more solid."

There are a few things the blue and gold could attempt if they want to achieve more success in this area. One thing they could try to do is try to prevent brawny forwards from even receiving the ball. It's difficult, but it would be incredibly helpful. Raptors head coach Nick Nurse pointed out that a big factor in Anunoby being able to score so well against the Pacers was that he was able to catch the ball often on the low block.

"I think that the other night we were able to find him down on the block quite a bit, and that was a good job," he said. "I think just recognition of him and other guys that were able to get the ball to him down there," he added when explaining how the Indiana University product was able to have a productive night. The Pacers needed to deny him those touches, but they didn't. It's something they could change going forward.

The Pacers are also turning the ball over often this season, giving their opponents extra possessions.

Cleaning up those offensive miscues would give these strong wings fewer chances to dominate the game against Indiana.

TORONTO, ON – October 27 In first half action, Toronto Raptors forward OG Anunoby (3) drives to the ... [+] hoop guarded by Indiana Pacers forward Justin Holiday (8) The Toronto Raptors took on the Indiana Pacers in NBA basketball action at the Scotiabank Arena in Toronto. October 27 2021 (Richard Lautens/Toronto Star via Getty Images)

Toronto Star via Getty Images

Even if the Pacers implemented those changes and increased their defensive attention on these forceful studs, it still might not accomplish much. Players of this build have general advantages thanks to their body type and, as a result, are just good players. Every team in the league is trying more and more to acquire players like this.

“I think that’s a position that everybody’s always looking for, the wing guy that can defend and shoot” Nurse said of these wings. His Raptors have several. “The reason is versatility.”

Since the league is trending in a direction where these players become even more valuable, it’s important that the Pacers improve in their efforts in slowing them down. That might require upping Craig’s minutes, and T.J. Warren’s eventual return to the rotation could help. It also might require strategic changes, and Carlisle has proven in his career that he is more than willing to adjust his game plan if it will help his team win. So the Pacers have a few options to improve in this department.

And they have to. They can’t continue to get torched by the same player archetype as it grows in popularity. Otherwise, they might get left behind by the rest of a constantly evolving league.

Source: [The Indiana Pacers Need Better Solutions To Defend Brawny Forwards](#)