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Kyrie Irving vs. Boston Celtics Fans: A Short History

Qasim Ali, Volunteer Reporter

During Game Two of the Brooklyn Nets vs. Boston Celtics first-round series, the chants seemed to rain down heavier than ever. Nets point guard Kyrie Irving was shooting two key free throws to put the Nets up 83-81. However, the pivotal moment was overshadowed by the animosity displayed by the thousands of Celtics fans.

This moment was one of many in Irving's second playoff return to Boston that seem harder to ignore. From middle fingers exchanged to profanity shouted in the tunnel, the usually stoic Irving showed a revealed aggression that seems to be brought out every time he steps into the TD Garden in Boston.

Why is this mutual rancor between Irving and Celtics fans so potent?

Let's start at the beginning.

Kyrie Irving, fresh off three straight NBA Finals appearances with the Cleveland Cavaliers, was traded to the Boston Celtics in the summer of 2017. The belief at the time was that Irving wanted to be the go-to option on a team that did not include spotlight star LeBron James.

To get Irving, the Celtics had to part ways with former MVP candidate Isaiah Thomas, a solid role player in Jae Crowder, and a first-round pick in that year's draft (who ended up being star point guard Colin Sexton). The Celtics were the first seed in the Eastern Conference the season before, so they essentially imploded their winning nucleus to put all their hopes on Irving.

He would be the focal point of the illustrious Celtics' franchise for years to come.

In their very first game of the season, Boston lost their supporting star Gordon Hayward to a fractured ankle. The C's forged on however, relying on Irving and their younger talent to carry the scoring burden.

The Celtics started the 2018 season 17-3 and looked to be more than just a simple playoff competitor. Much like this year's Boston team, they led the league in defensive rating and were one of the most balanced squads in basketball.

Their status as one of the championship favorites ended abruptly in March 2018 when Irving re-aggravated his surgically-repaired left knee. He then missed the rest of that season and the playoffs.



Surprisingly, the Celtics' young core fought their way to the Eastern Conference finals, where they would suffer a brutal Game Seven defeat to Cleveland. But the feeling in Boston was good. Second-year guard Jaylen Brown and rookie forward Jayson Tatum led the team in scoring. They looked to be the perfect pieces to surround Irving with when he recovered from knee surgery. In fact, the prospects for the 2019 Celtics looked so good that Irving put his money where his mouth was. "If you guys will have me back, I plan on re-signing here," Irving told Boston fans before the season started.

When the anticipation began, the Celtics began their season in far rougher shape than expected. Starting the year 10-10, Boston's star players still had rust on them and would need the full season to get back into form. By the end of the year, they finished with 49 wins and earned a playoff spot.

They would go on to make short work of the Indiana Pacers in the Eastern Conference first round but ran into a brick wall in the semi-finals. Boston faced the Milwaukee Bucks, a team that still ranks top 30 to this day in net rating of any team in NBA history.

In a "gentleman's sweep," the Bucks handled the Celtics winning four-straight after Boston took Game One, each by an average margin of over 16 points. The five-game series proved to be a demoralizing exit for the C's. With their future suddenly looking bleak, Irving made one of the more unexpected moves in league history.

Just seven months after announcing his intentions of re-signing with the Celtics, Irving, now a free agent, opted to sign a four-year contract with the Brooklyn Nets. His decision influenced the Nets' signing of former scoring champion Kevin Durant.

So, just as quickly as the hype began around Boston, it disintegrated. They were left without a point guard to run their offense properly, and instead had to quickly pivot to signing the less efficient Kemba Walker to fill Irving's shoes. The ritual burnings of Irving's jersey began almost immediately after Irving's decision was announced, foreshadowing a bitter war between the Celtics' fans and Irving.

But just as they did in 2018 without Irving, the Celtics seemed to play more inspired basketball in 2020. They once again reached the conference finals in the NBA COVID-19 bubble, and Tatum projected his presence as a top-25 player in the NBA with his performance that season. However, Irving had to play without the injured Durant for the 2020 season. But Irving ended up playing just 20 games for the Nets himself as he battled through injuries himself. Thanks to these limiting circumstances, he was yet to play in an arena full of hostile Celtics fans. The Nets were swept by the Toronto Raptors in the first round without Irving, continuing a line of disappointing seasons.

Going into 2021, both the Nets and Celtics had high hopes to finally break through. The Nets performed to expectations while the Celtics had a down year. This juxtaposition in performance led to the teams squaring off in the first round of the 2021 playoffs; Brooklyn being the favored second seed and Boston stumbling into the playoffs as the seventh seed.

The Celtics faced the Nets without Brown. His absence quickly put the Celtics in a 2-0 hole. As the lopsided series shifted to Boston however, the games themselves seemed to take a backseat. The main story was now Irving's first game back in Boston with fans present since his decision to leave 21 months earlier.

The reaction from fans was nothing short of expectations. Boos rained down on him every time he touched the ball. The years of resentment towards Irving were finally being released in one 48-minute window. Ultimately, the Celtics took Game Three as Irving struggled and Tatum dropped a 50-point masterclass.

The Nets would take the series in five games, but it was clear this animosity between Irving and Celtics fans would only grow stronger as time passed. A fan threw a water bottle at him the next game and was thrown out. Irving responded by stomping on the Celtics logo after the game and the ill will raged on.

The Nets would go on to lose a dramatic seven-game series to the eventual champion Milwaukee Bucks in the second round, as he again dealt with injuries.

Irving's media relations were on the ropes going into the current 2022 season. The PR got worse when it was revealed that he was not vaccinated against COVID-19. This meant he could not play home games for the Nets in 2022 due to New York City's vaccine requirements. It was yet another reason for him to take time away from the Nets; to that point he had played only 74 regular-season games for Brooklyn in two full seasons.

When Irving decided to rejoin the Nets in 2022, they needed him badly. They traded away star guard James Harden and were hovering around the .500 mark with Durant carrying them. With him and Durant back and the New York City vaccine mandate being lifted, the Nets returned to the playoffs as the seventh seed. Their matchup in the first round?

The Boston Celtics.

Now with the top-rated defense in the NBA and a bona fide All-NBA player in Tatum, the Celtics were the second seed this season, flipping the 2021 script on its head. When Game One tipped off, it was clear that the Irving and Celtics' fan-hate-fest would take center stage. Unlike 2021, the TD Garden was at full capacity, and fans took advantage of the proximity to Irving and ruthlessly heckled him. Instead of waiting for the game to end, he constantly chirped back at fans and made obscene gestures towards them throughout the game. Irving would go on to score 39 points, but it was Tatum who stole the show, hitting a game-winning buzzer-beater to steal the victory.

After the game, Irving defended his actions.

"There's only so much you can take as a competitor. We're the ones who are expected to be docile and be humble and take a humble approach. Nah f— that, it's the playoffs," Irving said. "It's the same energy I'm giving back to them."

Irving was fined \$50,000 by the NBA for his actions in Game One. Fortunately, that was enough for him to maintain his composure in Game Two. He was not spotted making any more gestures, but his production sharply fell as he scored a measly ten points in the loss. In a pivotal Game Three back in Brooklyn, he disappointed again with just 16 points. With the season on the line in Game Four, he managed just 20 points on 13 shots, and that was it for Brooklyn.

The Nets ended up getting swept by Irving's former team; a result that shocked many. Celtics fans are surely pleased with the result as they look to take on the Milwaukee Bucks in the next round. Going forward, the Irving versus Celtics' fans grudge match is sure to make more headlines as the two inevitably cross paths next season.