

Battle-tested Granger becoming elite force as Pacers playmaker

By [Scott Boeck](#), USA TODAY
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By Darron Cummings, AP

Danny Granger, getting kudos from Pacers teammate T.J. Ford in a game against the Suns, has risen into the top 10 in the NBA in scoring average this season.

[Danny Granger](#) has improved virtually every aspect of his game in each of his four seasons with the Indiana Pacers. And he's proving to be a gladiator.

His most impressive statistic? The 6-8 forward was fifth in scoring (24.2-point average) heading into Tuesday night's home game against the Los Angeles Lakers. Only four points a game separated him from leader Dwyane Wade, with LeBron James (27.8), Chris Bosh (27.7) and Kobe Bryant (24.5) within reach.

Only Granger of that group was not an Olympian. Last season he averaged 19.6 points.

"I like to build on my success from my previous year," says Granger, drafted out of New Mexico in the first round (17th overall) in 2005. "Every year I work on what I'm good at and carry it over into the next season, and my confidence grows."

Larry Bird, the Pacers' president of basketball operations, heavily invested in the 25-year-old Granger, who signed a five-year, \$60 million contract extension Oct. 31.

Granger became the Pacers' playmaker with the departure of Jermaine O'Neal, who signed with the Toronto Raptors.

"Every team needs a go-to guy," Granger says. "I'm going to try and fill in that role as well as possible."

Granger is a self-professed movie buff who says he owns more than 2,000 movies.

His favorite: *Gladiator*.

He has played the role of Maximus (portrayed by Russell Crowe) this season:

•**Nov. 1**— Knocks out two front teeth on a face-plant to the court against the Boston Celtics in the fourth quarter. He stayed in the game, won 95-79 by Indiana.

"It was a hell of a hustle play," coach Jim O'Brien said then. "He pressured up on (Boston's Paul) Pierce, got a deflection, dove face first. I went out to say 'great job.' He smiled at me and he didn't have any teeth."

•**Nov. 22**— Leaves in the fourth quarter against the Miami Heat after spraining his left ankle with 10:15 to go. Returns to play the final eight minutes, adding five points.

"As a professional athlete, we bleed through our whole careers," Granger says. "We've broken bones, torn ligaments, busted teeth. It's part of the game. It's kind of fun when you do it and actually win."