

How the West Was Won

The San Antonio Spurs have arrived ahead of schedule. Their chaotic back and forth with the Oklahoma City Thunder over the next decade will define the NBA's next great era.

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It all seemed very simple just one year ago for the Oklahoma City Thunder.

They won their franchise's first NBA championship after taking down the Indiana Pacers in a muddy seven game series. They were the best team all year, winning 68 regular season games and torpedoing the competition along the way.

Through savvy front office work spearheaded by general manager Sam Presti, the Thunder's roster was built to immaculate perfection. They had an MVP point guard (Shai Gilgeous-Alexander) and a worthy Robin to SGA's Batman (Jalen Williams). They had big man depth (Chet Holmgren, Isaiah Hartenstein) and capable role players on the perimeter (Alex Caruso, Lu Dort, Cason Wallace). Their intelligent coaching staff played the right tunes and hit the right buttons, game by game. Their roster was young, not yet at their ceiling, and gained valuable title experience in the process.

Quite simply, coming into this season, there was no team better equipped to both win now *and* win later than the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Over the course of the past two weeks, the seemingly inevitable blanket of dominance that the Thunder were set to unleash slowly unraveled. The San Antonio Spurs, led by a generational superstar, are perhaps the team most suited to stall the Thunder's reign atop the league.

It was eventually supposed to happen, but not this soon. Their core is young, their head coach is green, and their most likely roadblock to the NBA Finals would always be the Thunder.

Over the course of the regular season, it became increasingly obvious that this Spurs team had punched several levels above their weight class. On Saturday night, that development reached an ultimate crescendo.

The 2026 Western Conference Finals was fraught with narratives and storylines that ended up outweighing the actual basketball. There were two classics. Game one, a double overtime thriller in Oklahoma City, ended with a Spurs victory. Their superstar, Victor Wembanyama, finished with 41 points and 24 rebounds, capped off by a Stephen Curry-esque game-tying three pointer from 30+ feet in the dying seconds of regulation.

In game seven, the Spurs nearly led wire to wire. They started hot and essentially never let their foot off the gas. Wembanyama was masterful again, and his supporting cast was every bit as important. SGA, who by this point was having a less-than-stellar series by his standards, came alive in game seven. He was admittedly wonderful, but he did not have enough. The Thunder were hobbled, with both Jalen Williams and Ajay Mitchell out due to injury. The Spurs took advantage.

With five less competitive games in between, most will remember the bookends of the series: the sensational double overtime game one where the Spurs hype began, and the commanding game seven performance where all of the hype became reality.

There are plenty of factors to the Spurs quick ascension, but factor 1A is their seven-foot-four, 235 pound French phenom. Wembanyama will be the focal point of the NBA's next great era, but it was not supposed to happen this quickly and fervently. Wembanyama is a true once-in-a-generation talent. Not all prospects live up to their hype, but some do. Has any prospect ever ascended up their legacy ladder this quickly?

Wembanyama's supporting cast has turned out to be the perfect mix of experience and youth. De'Aaron Fox, Devin Vassell, and Julian Champagne are the veteran presences in the rotation. Stephon Castle and Dylan Harper run the backcourt as one of the league's most exciting young tandems. Harper is a silky smooth scorer and plays beyond his years; Castle is a defensive powerhouse with a knack for high-octane athleticism and driving the lane. Luke Kornet gives the non-Wembanyama minutes a new look, and Harrison Barnes plays his role well as the most valuable veteran piece coming off of the bench.

This Texas cocktail of power, talent, and aggression stifled the Thunder all series long. They were able to give SGA different defensive looks, and the Thunder defense had no answer for Wembanyama. The "others" on this roster are hard enough to deal with, but how does any team deal with a seven-foot-four monster who can shoot from anywhere, go up for lobs, and affect every shot on the defensive end by simply standing there?

If you watched the series over the last few weeks, then you watched the NBA's future. Remember, it was just one season ago where people were saying this about the Thunder. The Thunder had a clear runway. They had the draft capital, the highest ceiling of any core in the league, and an MVP-caliber player at his absolute peak.

Somehow, just a season later, the Spurs have crashed the party. They were always going to be good, but *this good? This soon?* Wembanyama is 22, with Castle and Harper coming up the back end at 21 and 20, respectively. This was not a one-season wonder. This was what people around the league were expecting— *eventually*. Nobody was expecting this now.

Except the Spurs. It seems the players themselves are simply cut from a different competitive cloth. They beat the Thunder at their own game. They were physical, angry, and lethal on defense. They were pesky on ball defenders and talked trash.

Wembanyama wanted to win, perhaps more than anybody on the court. His celebration for winning the conference finals was even more intense than the Thunder's celebration for actually winning the title last year. For them, it was business. For Wembanyama, it felt like life or death.

Suddenly, the next decade of the NBA has been drawn out for us. The New York Knicks await the Spurs in the NBA Finals that tip off this Wednesday, and make no mistake, they are a lethal force. However, this Western Conference map just became the most alluring NBA storyline going in the modern era. The Thunder were supposed to be an unstoppable force, but the Spurs stopped them. The Thunder will only get more talented and the Spurs will only get more confident. Oklahoma City is already hooked on Thunder hoops, and now San Antonio can return to their post at the peak of NBA fandom.

The stars of tomorrow just put on a clinic in the present day. With the likes of LeBron James, Kevin Durant, and Stephen Curry on the back nine of their careers, the new blood needs to earn their stripes. Wembanyama will lead the charge for the Spurs. The Thunder may be the only team built to stop them.

Let the games begin.