

How Second Fiddle Markets Won Free Agency

By: Austin Rader



July 7, 2019 - On a hot summer night in Los Angeles, a 7.1 earthquake struck the city around 11:00 pm local time. The fans at Dodger Stadium immediately rushed outside of the park. The jumbotron started shaking in the Thomas & Mack Center during the Knicks-Pelicans Summer League game indicating an earthquake had also hit Las Vegas.

Moments later, Kwahi Leonard made his long awaited free agency decision.

Not one sports analyst could have guessed how this basketball soap opera would play out. Kwahi Leonard would take his talents to Los Angeles to play for the Clippers. The shocking part is Jerry West struck a deal with Oklahoma City Thunder GM Sam Presti sending five future first round draft picks (4 protected) for All NBA small forward Paul George.

This sent shock waves throughout the NBA world, also registering a 7.1 on the richter scale.

Six days earlier, KD and Kyrie announced they will be playing for the Brooklyn Nets along with Deandre Jordan.

This left the New York Knicks coming up empty handed in landing a superstar during the free agency sweepstakes. The Lakers felt that they had won Kwahi over during their courtship, leading to the modern era's "best big three" if they landed his services.

Both of these historic franchises lost to the "second fiddle" team in their respective city. The Lakers own "Hollywood" and The Knicks are the face of the league's biggest market.

How did the Nets and Clippers' organizations pull this off?

The Brooklyn Nets stated in May that they only wanted Kyrie's services if he could bring KD with him. The writing was on the wall when Kyrie signed with Rock Nation Sports in May. Brooklyn was Kyrie's first choice. Having a young core that made the playoffs this past season helped lure Kevin Durant and Caris Levert's style of play attracted Durant to want to play with him in Brooklyn.

Add Brooklyn's resume of two Finals appearances and ten playoff appearances compared to the Knicks NO Finals appearance and just five playoff appearances in the last 20 years goes to show that the Nets have been the best organization in New York since the turn of the century.

KD obviously didn't care about the Knicks rich basketball history. He wanted to go to New York, the "mecca" of basketball but playing alongside his friend Kyrie along with a talented young core didn't hurt.

It also doesn't help that James Dolan, the Knicks not-so-popular owner, decided NOT to offer KD a max deal after he suffered a torn achilles in game five of the NBA Finals. But even if he had made the max offer, Durant's mind was already made up. He wants to bring Brooklyn their first ever NBA Championship.

Just before 2:00 am eastern time, ESPN's Woj tweeted the biggest bomb of the summer. Kwahi Leonard will be taking his talents back home to Southern California and will be teaming up with six time all star Paul George. (What about the King and AD?).



This turn of events is why it took all week for Kwahi to announce his decision. The reports of his Monday night meeting in Malibu with Doc Rivers and Jerry West didn't go well were simply false. It turns out their get-together went extremely well. So well that they sold the two time Finals MVP on suiting up for the Clippers. Kwahi convinced Paul George to request a trade from OKC and West and Presti went to work.

Kwahi could have stayed in Toronto and been the biggest legend in Canada for the rest of his life (he still could be). He could have gone to the Lakers to team up with LeBron James and Anthony Davis and try to bring the Purple & Gold their 17th, 18th and possibly 19th NBA Championships. Follow his hero Kobe, or Magic with more Laker banners.

But no, Leonard and his camp made the best decision for his future in signing with the Clippers. Kwahi will be able to play with a talented

young core in Montrez Harrell and Landry Shamet, as well as veterans Lou Williams and Patrick Beverly. And best of all, he will be alongside LA native and friend Paul George.

George and Leonard have similar backgrounds. Both were lowly touted out of high school. Both went to smaller colleges (George went to Fresno State, Kwahi went to San Diego State), and both were drafted in the 10-15 range of their respective drafts.

It makes total sense that these two would want to team up and play for their hometown.

But it's not the main team in LA.

Even though Los Angeles is a Lakers town, the Clippers organization were able to sell Kwahi on a future hall of fame coach in Doc Rivers, the best executive in sports in Jerry West, and a feisty owner in Steve Ballmer. Plus, Kwahi would be able to play close to home, and he will have his own medical staff in Los Angeles, another key determining factor.

This is how secondary teams in big cities win in free agency. Never assume that the current crop of NBA superstars will play in the league's "traditional" hot spots. Today's stars are writing their own rules. Their priorities are different than previous players.

Kwahi, George, KD and Irving proved this point last week.