



The Dynasty That Never Was: How The “Thunder” Never Created Any “Lightning”

By: Austin Rader

August 4, 2019 -- Small market teams in the NBA rarely win championships. The San Antonio Spurs are the standard blueprint that a small market organization can become a dynasty. They won four championships from 1997-2014. This was due to drafting extremely well, developing their youth, and having the greatest coach of all time didn't hurt either.

When a 22 year old James Harden hit the biggest shot of his young career that silenced the San Antonio crowd, this sent wave shocks throughout the NBA. The young Thunder were one game of going to the NBA Finals. The stepback three Harden made over Kawhi Leonard signaled the arrival as a contender in the league for years to come. This shot was in the 2012 Western Conference Finals that stretched the Thunder lead to five points in a pivotal Game Five. The cameras went straight to James Harden being greeted by Russell Westbrook and being playfully shoved by Kevin Durant. The Thunder would seal the win in San Antonio, taking a commanding 3-2 lead in the series.

Two nights later, The Thunder punched their ticket to the NBA Finals.

They had arrived

In Game One of the Finals, Russell Westbrook made a fade-away jumper over Dwyane Wade to put the Thunder up 8 with under 2:00 minutes to go. Their game one win against Miami marked the closest they got to a championship.

It wasn't supposed to be their peak.

This young talented Thunder core that GM Sam Presti drafted were supposed to bring multiple banners in Chesapeake Arena.

Kevin Durant, James Harden and Russell Westbrook have a combined 24 all star appearances, and 3 MVP's. Serge Ibaka was a defensive force, from 2010-2015 he was the best shot blocker in the NBA.

Back in 2012, nobody would've thought that by 2019 all four of those players would've left without winning a ring in OKC. Three weeks ago marked an end of an era.

But how did this dynasty end without anything to show for it?

Those young talented Thunder teams that we thought would be the face of the NBA for years to come, are all gone. 2012's NBA Finals appearance marked their arrival. After a loss to LeBron's Heat, it felt like the Thunder would get a couple more cracks at the Larry O' Brien trophy.

It never happened.

When they failed to reach a contract extension, the Thunder traded James Harden to the Houston Rockets five days before the 2012-13 season started. Even though Harden flourished in Houston becoming a star, the Thunder kept winning winning a franchise record 60 wins. Looking back on it, this was the beginning of the end.

Re-loading after Harden's departure

I don't know why they couldn't get the deal done with Harden. But trading a player of his caliber hurt the organization. Fans didn't get as mad given his poor showing in the 2012 Finals. But he was also only 22 years old. They were only going to get better which is why keeping the band intact is so important.

In 2014, Durant had an MVP season but the Thunder couldn't get back to the Finals. They would've matched up against the Miami Heat in a rematch of the 2012 Finals.

In Durant's last season of his contract, the Thunder upset a loaded Spurs team and would face the 73 win Warriors in the Conference Finals.

After going up three games to one the Thunder had three chances to put away the Warriors and failed to do so.

After a stunning home loss in game six, the camera's showed Durant's slow walk back to the locker room and you got the feeling that it could've been his last home game in the orange and blue.

A Shocking Exit

On July 4th, 2016 Kevin Durant shockingly signed with the Golden State Warriors. A trip to the finals would've all but ensured that KD would stay in OKC.

“A bigger market persuaded a superstar to leave a small market organization.”

The Warriors were able to sell Durant on winning championships as well as playing in their free-flowing brand of basketball that better fits his play style.

The day after Durant met with the Warriors in the Hamptons he received a phone call from Jerry West. West was able to convince the four time scoring champ to chase championships.

One Last Push

Presti responded with Durant’s departure by bringing in Paul George. But it didn’t work. George isn’t the scorer Durant is, and the Thunder didn’t have enough scoring off the bench.

The Thunder won a combined three playoff games in the three seasons after Durant left.

The high point was Westbrook successfully convincing Paul George to re-sign with OKC over bigger markets. However, after a Damien Lillard series ending buzzer beater that sent the Thunder home in the 1st round of the playoffs, the Thunder organization knew a change was coming sooner rather than later.

Paul George’s trade request to Los Angeles signaled a chance to start over in this diamond in the rough basketball town.



Hitting the reset button

Presti shipped Paul George to his hometown team. Five days later, he traded Russell Westbrook to Houston.

This truly marked the end of the dynasty that never happened.

The young core of KD, Russ, Harden and Serge were supposed to bring the small market Oklahoma City Thunder a championship and possibly more. They were going to be the team that did it the right way. Draft well, develop their talent and win championships. Like the San Antonio Spurs did before them.

Instead it ended with only one Finals appearance.

This city will be tested as a fanbase for the next couple of seasons on how they will handle the long rebuild that awaits them.

It will be interesting to see if they can successfully draft the next wave of NBA stars. They will have a total of eight 1st round picks over the next six years due to the Paul George and Russell Westbrook trades.

The good news for Oklahomians? Jalen Hurts is running the Sooners offense.