

It was just a little more than a week ago when it looked like the Oklahoma City Thunder were set up for a trip to the NBA Finals. Then again, the Thunder being set up for the Finals has been the case pretty much every year since the team first made it there in 2012. Such is the charmed existence of a franchise headlined by Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook.

Well, the Thunder were *supposed* to be enjoying a charmed existence for these past four years, anyway. Instead, what happened is a brutal reminder of how coldly random and unforgiving sports can be.

In 2013, the Thunder won 60 games and clinched the West's top seed, but fell in the second round after Westbrook's right knee was taken out in the first round by the Houston Rockets' Patrick Beverley. In 2014, the Thunder qualified for the conference finals, but couldn't recover from Serge Ibaka's injury that put them in an 0-2 hole to start the series against the San Antonio Spurs. In 2015, the Thunder missed the playoffs entirely after Durant and Westbrook were both injured for large portions of the season.

This year was supposed to be when the Thunder would put it all together, health permitting. Complementary players such as Steven Adams and Andre Roberson had developed into useful pieces, and Dion Waiters and Enes Kanter were becoming a bit more comfortable with the team after being acquired at midseason last year. Durant and Westbrook were still Durant and Westbrook.

Their reward for finally being healthy? Back-to-back Western Conference series against historically-great Spurs and Golden State Warriors teams. And as we saw a few days ago, the Thunder couldn't quite finish the job against a Warriors team for the ages, falling short of the Finals for the fourth straight year amid a barrage of threes that largely couldn't have been defended much better. OKC's remarkable effort, in most other years, is probably good enough to make the Finals, but not this year.

After the 2012 Finals, if someone had proclaimed that the Thunder weren't going to even make it back within the next four years (let alone win a title), that idea would've been preposterous. The Thunder were so loaded with young talent and got some experience under the brightest lights. Multiple Finals appearance seemed inevitable.

But almost everything that could go wrong did go wrong, and now with Durant's free agency this summer, it's possible that 2012 was our last and only chance to see the Durant-Westbrook Thunder in the Finals. If we learn anything from these past four years in Oklahoma City, it's that windows of opportunity in the NBA are alarmingly fragile, no matter how seemingly wide open they are. If it's not injuries, it's superstars leaving town (sound familiar, mid-90s Magic fans?). If not either of those, a dynasty could always surface elsewhere in the league to thwart your dreams (also sound familiar, mid-90s Magic fans?).

And these unfortunate events color our perceptions of the Thunder's stars, fairly or not. For example, there are people who think that Durant is "too nice" to win with. Even more people think that any team with Westbrook playing the point is fatally flawed.

But what if just one injury in the past four seasons went the Thunder's way, instead of taking out one of their stars? Would you have been surprised during the past four years if any given healthy Thunder team won a title? And if that happened, what would you think of Durant and Westbrook?

It's apparent that things outside of a player's control can influence our perception of him, and that seems obviously unjust. However, it's also comforting to believe in a fair and just world, so we often contort our narratives to fit what happened. We think that because sports are the ultimate meritocracy, there *must* be some better, more fundamental reason that the Thunder haven't won a title in the Durant-Westbrook era. They *can't* be championship material. Otherwise, it would've happened by now. Right? *Right?*

But why can't the explanation be nothing more than indiscriminate luck? Why must there be an explanation outside of that? Nothing is guaranteed, but getting back to the Finals is a lot easier when you don't have three seasons torpedoed by random injury. Sure, Durant and Westbrook have their flaws, but plenty of very imperfect players have been good enough to lead championship teams.

If Durant isn't championship material, that fact somehow isn't keeping fans from drooling over his free agency. For the time being, Marc Stein is reporting that Durant is expected to re-sign with the Thunder, even if just on a short deal. Many believe that Durant's best chance at a championship in the near future lies in Oklahoma City (save for the Warriors, perhaps).

By now, however, we should know better than to assume Finals appearances by the Thunder within the next few years. Both Durant and Westbrook are in their primes, but we don't know how many more years of apex Westbrook we have left. Maybe injury luck will gift windows of opportunity to the Thunder, but it could just as easily close those windows. We also

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know that some key Thunder players are going to start becoming expensive soon, and those Warriors are probably going to be around for a while.

Now with the Finals in progress, it's as good a time as any to appreciate LeBron's recent run of six straight appearances in the NBA's title round. It's a testament to his singular dominance, but as should be evident by now, also a testament to (relatively) good fortune. Capitalizing on windows of opportunity requires luck as well as skill.

The Oklahoma City Thunder have been well-positioned on the skill front for some time now (Charles Barkley even said that this year's edition had the most talent in the league). They also play hard and generally stay out of trouble. They've done just about everything a team is supposed to do, and even inspired, from at least one writer, references to Greek mythology with their play in this year's conference finals against the Warriors.

But this June, like in the past three years, they'll be watching from home just like us. Sometimes, being good enough isn't good enough. Sometimes, you need luck too.

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