

## ***OKC Thunder need Russell Westbrook and Paul George to fail immediately***



*The Thunder's best chance at winning a championship is if the superstar duo of Russell Westbrook and Paul George fails for an extended period, and it has to be now.*

Part of winning a championship is peaking at the right time. The Oklahoma City Thunder have been slowly building steam all season long and have won several thrilling games in the past couple months, but there is still a lot of room for improvement. With the playoffs approaching, OKC needs to harden its team from top to bottom in preparation for a deep run that hopefully ends in the Thunder hoisting the Larry O'Brien Trophy in Chesapeake Energy Arena.

Russell Westbrook and Paul George, both MVP talents, are the unquestioned leaders of the Thunder. They bring consistent intensity and high-level performance to every game, and their supporting cast falls in line with its roles with great success. However, this can't be the only arrangement OKC fields with success.

Identity plays a huge role in how teams strategize and execute their game plans, but what happens when that identity is compromised in key moments of crucial playoff games? The Oklahoma City Thunder don't want to find out, and they surely won't seek out that reckoning, but there are multiple reasons it could be okay and even preferred to find out sooner rather than later.

For several reasons, the Thunder's best chance at winning a championship is if superstars Russell Westbrook and Paul George, recently dubbed "R-PG", fail for several weeks. It can't simply be the Brodie and PG-13 struggling to perform at their usual high levels, and it can't be later. It has to be a mighty fail, it has to be for an extended period, and it has to be now. The Thunder's chances at winning an NBA title might just depend on it.

Here's why...



## So goes the bench, so goes the team

A deep, competitive bench is the key to winning a NBA championship in today's league. Performance is expected to drop off slightly when starters step off the court, but the second unit can't be a liability if the Thunder hope to make a push for a Western Conference title and spot in the NBA Finals.

With a new teammate on the roster in Markieff Morris, the urgency to solidify the second unit is more prevalent and pressing than ever. Morris needs to adapt to the Thunder culture and gameplay to find his role, but he isn't the only non-starter who needs to establish himself. All players on the Thunder roster would benefit from stepping back to assess their game and remember how they fit into the bigger picture before taking the next step into the playoffs.

The time is now for the Thunder bench to succeed without Westbrook and George. Although no fan wishes the duo to fall out of sync and struggle, it is the only way for the other starters and bench players to rely solely on themselves to coalesce into a separate identity that allows them to succeed without their superstar leaders. The Thunder have enough potential to put a competitive team on the court without Westbrook and George. Though unwanted, they would benefit from learning through trial and error now rather than game seven of the first round of playoffs.





## Timing is everything

Part of being successful in life is simply the timing of everything. Sometimes, it's just about being in the right place at the right time. The ebb and flow of a basketball season is no different. Earning a playoff spot and making a deep run requires peaking at the right time with the right lineups and a proper mindset.

If Westbrook and George both happen to enter a dry spell in their production in the near future, then the best time for them to find their grooves again would be right after the home and away series with the Toronto Raptors toward the end of March. That would mean there are 12 games in which they struggle through a three week period.

More importantly, that means they would have nine games to regain their prowess through two weeks of gameplay before the playoffs commence. That would be plenty of time for them to reassert themselves as the superstars they are before leading the Thunder into the first round of playoffs.



## Act like you've been there

Creating a formidable Thunder team sans Westbrook and George isn't simply about helping the supporting cast of starters and role players find their own collective identity. The Thunder already have an identity that has garnered great success in strong rebounding, a suffocating defense, creating turnovers, and a fast-paced offense. Unifying the team without its superstars serves a more important purpose - preparing OKC to contend on short notice without numbers 0 or 13 on the court due to injury.

No Thunder fan wishes it to happen, but the potential is always there for an injury to occur to one or both halves of the R-PG tandem. Even if only for one game it would behoove the Thunder to know how to adjust without Westbrook or George on the court. As the word on the streets go, "act like you've been there."

Should Westbrook and George simultaneously fail to live up to their standards for an extended period, the Thunder wouldn't have to act because they will have already been there. Knowing how to adjust the lineup and strategy will create confidence rather than panic. It would prevent an urgent rush to learn on the fly because OKC will have already developed an alternative identity to fall back on. The Thunder shouldn't try to act like they've been there. Instead, they should be able to respond and act decisively because they have already learned how to adjust to that situation in the event of losing one or both of their superstars.





## Every season starts at 0-0

Many fans may think this whole idea is absurd. They'll scoff in disgust at the mere thought of hoping Westbrook and George fall out of sync with their own standards of performance. It's not hope, mind you. It's growing pains - unwanted but useful preparation. Some of you may still belittle this whole idea and complain of the potential for losing multiple games that costs the Thunder its current seeding in the Western Conference.

Fear not, Loud City, because none of it matters. The regular season sees all teams start with a 0-0 record. The playoffs are no different and are their own season. In fact, it even has a different name - the postseason. The playoffs are their own entity and should be treated as such. Playoff seeding simply doesn't matter. Be it first or eighth seed, every team starts a brand new series, i.e. a new season at 0-0.

Not convinced? You'd still rather play the number six seed in the first round? At some point, the Thunder will have to beat out the number one seeded Golden State Warriors en route to The NBA Finals. To beat out the detested, yet golden standard, Warriors in round one would make a heckuva statement to the rest of the league that the Oklahoma City Thunder are in it to win it and will not settle for less. Playoff-P can have the opportunity to make headlines as MVPG, and as far as Westbrook is concerned, something tells me he would say "Why not?".



## **Be fearless, be feared**

The OKC Thunder have as much potential as they've ever had, but there are still important lessons to be learned. Westbrook seems to have shaken his shooting woes for the time being, and George has been an unstoppable force all season long, but individual star power won't carry this team to a championship. Molding a cohesive unit that trusts one another, from MVP-caliber starters to the last man off the bench, is the best way to make a resilient team capable of running through the playoffs.

The most dangerous teams are those that are hard to defend. The most difficult teams to defend are those whose players all have the capability and confidence to score at will and take over a game at any moment. For the Oklahoma City Thunder, that means the Brodie and PG-13 need to fail - immediately. It wouldn't be comfortable, it wouldn't be the most confidence-inspiring, and it wouldn't be fun. Nonetheless, it very well may be the best thing this Oklahoma City Thunder team could use to coalesce into the team nobody wants to face in the playoffs.