

Stairway to Kevin

HIGH-TOP HERO
 Luke and Drew Chansolme, 8 and 6, and Jack Sigmon, 8, with Kevin Durant, the 2010 Oklahoman of the Year. Luke and Jack attended Durant's summer 2010 basketball camp at Heritage Hall; all three look forward to it next summer.

Twenty-two-year-olds who own property in Gaillardia, one of Oklahoma City's most exclusive neighborhoods, are a rarity. The star player for the Oklahoma City Thunder does. And he even hopes the kids down the street will come knocking. Oklahoman of the Year—and NBA MVP heir apparent—Kevin Durant is proud to call Oklahoma home. Thunder up!

BY STEFFIE CORCORAN
PORTRAITS BY JOHN JERNIGAN

EVERYBODY WHO KNOWS anything about sports knows about Oklahoma City's resident NBA superstar, Kevin Durant. Durantula. Velvet Hoop. Baby Ice. KD.

They know the six-foot-nine small forward from the Washington, D.C., area played college ball down the road in Austin and left for the NBA after his freshman year with more player-of-the-year awards than he could carry.

They know the Seattle SuperSonics drafted him in the first round, the second player taken in 2007. They recall how his first year in Seattle was heavy on both drama and accomplishments. Rumors that the team could be moving to the new ownership group's home base of Oklahoma City spread like a summer grass fire. Despite the tempest brewing in Seattle, Durant was named Rookie of the Year with a 20.3 points-per-game average after a season in which his struggling team won only twenty games.

They also know he was even better his second season. The team, christened the Thunder, did relocate to Oklahoma City, where sell-out crowd after sell-out crowd at the Ford Center recognized

Durant as the player a franchise was being built around and reveled in everything from his stutter step to his silky-smooth three.

They're aware that in 2010, Kevin Durant had the kind of year most of us who've ever tried to sink ten free throws in a row or run suicides on our high school court can only dream about: leadership that took the Thunder to its first-ever playoff appearance against the eventual champion Los Angeles Lakers (and gave them all they could handle), NBA scoring champion (the youngest ever at age twenty-one, with 30.1 points per game), and runner-up to LeBron James for the MVP award.

This summer, Kevin Durant signed an \$85 million contract extension with the Thunder that ensures he will play in Oklahoma City through at least the 2015-2016 season. That contract does not include a player option that would allow him to seek more dollars and a bigger market. (He told his agent, Aaron Goodwin, he didn't want it.)

He also managed to squeeze in the FIBA World Championships, where Team USA won the gold medal and, reversing a long drought in international

play, brought the trophy back home for the first time since 1994, when Durant, the tournament's MVP, was just preparing to start kindergarten. ("He was a joy to coach," says legendary Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski, who led Team USA.)

Yes, they know all that. What they—and many Oklahomans—may not know is that Kevin Durant is a young man deeply invested in his community. Raising the profile of his adopted home state on a national and global level is a byproduct of that investment that follows naturally on the heels of his enormous talent.

With a prodigious work ethic befitting *Labor Omnia Vincit*, enough humility to make Will Rogers beam with pride, and a heart as big as the plains sky, Kevin Durant seems made for Oklahoma.

SAM PRESTI, general manager for the Oklahoma City Thunder, first took notice of the lanky, baby-faced University of Texas freshman in 2006, when he was assistant GM for the San Antonio Spurs, just eighty miles from Austin.

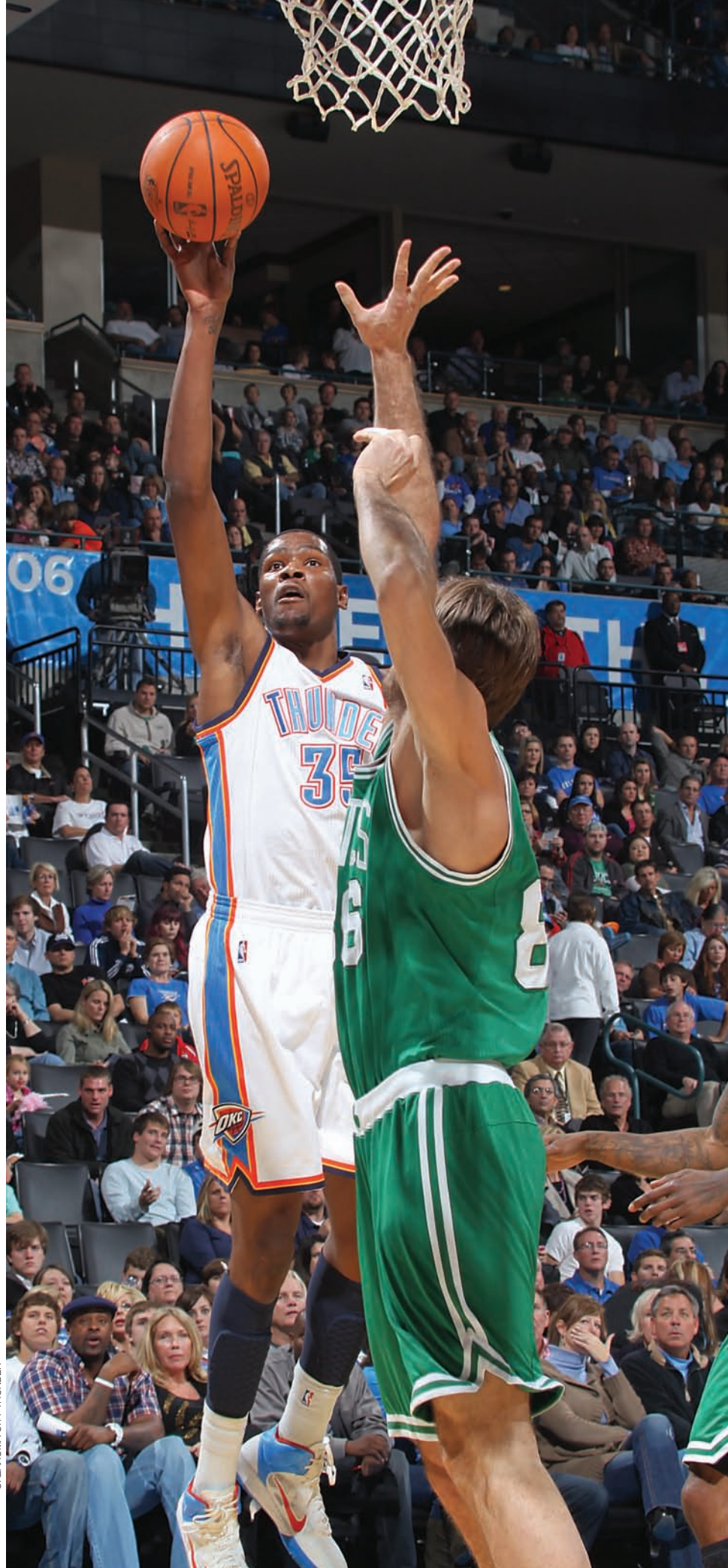
He recalls being struck by Durant's grace, talent, and work ethic—qualities that less than a year later led Presti, newly minted as the SuperSonics' GM, to draft him in the first round.

"Kevin personifies so much of what our organization is trying to be about," he says. "Those qualities run parallel with the values of this city and state. His commitment to giving back to the community in which he lives really establishes the fact that he is a true citizen who values the support he's received and is focused on returning that support with his time in other philanthropic endeavors."

Durant says his love of kids drives many of his off-the-court activities, including an annual summer basketball camp held at Heritage Hall, a private school in Oklahoma City. All too often, such camps are in-name-only affairs where the namesake player is more visible on the publicity poster than hanging with kids in the gym.

Not so with KD.

At age 16, Durant could, in one step, reach 17.5 inches above a ten-foot rim. Here, he takes a shot over Semih Erden of the Boston Celtics.



"I'm like, 'Kevin, come on, you're in town, you gotta come visit the gym and work out,'" says Thunder head coach Scott Brooks, no slouch in the 2010-Was-a-Good-Year department, having been named the NBA Coach of the Year in April. "He told me, 'No, Coach, I've gotta go over to camp for three or four hours. I'll see you after camp.' He'll sneak in during lunch hour and then go back for the second session. Who does that?"

Durant—who can't get enough of Xbox games like Madden and Call of Duty: Black Ops and admits he's a big kid himself—says he learned the importance of athletes interacting with youngsters at an early age. He's never forgotten that when he was growing up, the resident NBA team, the Washington Bullets, never seemed to make appearances in his community.

"I just wanted to let kids know I could be around," he says. "I could help them out just practicing with them for two or three hours a day at my summer camp, building relationships with three or four kids who've been through a lot. Hopefully, I'm helping."

Last season, when Durant was renting a house in the Rose Creek neighborhood, two kids lived across the street and would knock on his door regularly. He welcomed their visits and was appreciative of neighbors who would drop by with cookies and Skittles.

In his new neighborhood, he's the only house on the street so far.

"I miss seeing the little kids come past," he says.

A couple of youngsters did make it by his new place on Halloween, and Durant talked with them and let them take some pictures.

"I like doing that kind of stuff," he says. "If an NBA player lived down the street from me, I'd be over there almost every day. I like to interact with kids, tell them I'm a normal person."

The inspiration for Durant's generosity is fundamental.

"In the Bible, it says it's better to give than receive, and I take that to heart," he says. "Whenever somebody needs something, I try to provide it for them. Maybe if I touch one person, they touch one person, and they touch another one, it'll start like a plague."

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THE BASKETBALL GODS have indeed smiled upon Kevin Durant: He's got the height. He's got the moves. He's

got the shots. He's got a seven-foot-four-inch wingspan.

To be sure, he possesses enviable athletic gifts, but they're not the only things that distinguish Durant as a player. What sets him apart is a formidable work ethic and reverence for the effort behind the uniform.

"He works hard every day on the court," says Jeff Green, power forward for the Thunder and a close friend. "When you've got one of the best players in the NBA, you want to follow his lead; you want to become the player he is and be as developed as he is. So when you see him working hard, you want to do the same."

When fans (Durant dislikes the term, preferring "extended family") see KD under the bright lights of the Oklahoma City Arena, it's easy to be seduced by the spectacle: the pounding beats of AC/DC and Jay-Z; the roar of thousands; the fluidity and grace of elite athletes.

The reality is much more prosaic, grounded in the monotonous drumbeat of drills, scrimmages, shoot-arounds, and practice, practice, practice.

"That's what impresses me most—his consistency every day," says Brooks. "It's borderline boring. As a coach and a teammate, you know what you're getting with Kevin. If things don't go well the night before, he's going to come in and work. If things go well the night before, he's going to come in and work. His teammates love that."

Indeed, it would be hard to find an athlete who more wholeheartedly em-

What's Good?

Kevin Durant has hundreds of thousands of friends and followers around the world.

Like most twenty-somethings, Kevin Durant is a big fan of social media. His social networking activity, however, is on a grander scale than most. On August 30, during the early rounds of the FIBA World Championships, Durant was a trending worldwide Twitter topic—one of the ten most-tweeted topics in the world. More than half a million Facebook fans and nearly 400,000 Twitter followers hang on his every word. (Incidentally, he regularly posts and tweets back.) Here are a few of his most memorable recent entries.

OCTOBER 24: Headed to the biggest room in the world...Room for Improvement!!!

OCTOBER 23: Good-morning! Thank God we were able to see another day!! Thank you guys for all the love but I have to continue to get better...practice mode

OCTOBER 17: In San Antonio. Bout to go watch jackass 3D with all my Thunder bros. Yesssir

OCTOBER 9: Braums

SEPTEMBER 27: Media Day...Today starts another year of basketball... Praise be to God for letting us see another one!!

SEPTEMBER 13: Beyonce walked out on stage during the jay/em show and me, James Harden and Rudy Gay almost fainted lol

AUGUST 7: What's good facebook?

Dropped my blackberry in a bucket of ice while icing my feet this morn. Worst luck with blackberries! Iphone4 still good though lol.

JULY 7: Exstension for 5 more years wit the Thunder...God Is Great, me and my family came a long way...I love yall man forreal, this a blessing!



braces the concept of team. It's Durant who yells "family" after every huddle and who, as the clock ticked down to zero on April 30, huddled his teammates—his brothers, he calls them—at the free throw line after the last game of the playoffs against the Lakers.

"Next season starts now," he said.

What happened after that was one of the most incredible scenes in Oklahoma sports history. Rather than heading for the nearest exit, more than 18,000 blue-clad fans (before the game, every seat in the stadium was draped with a Thunder blue T-shirt) took to their feet for a standing ovation—after a loss. The roar of the crowd picked up in intensity and volume and continued until the last player left the floor twenty minutes later.

Veteran NBA insiders said they never had seen anything like it.

Those fans were applauding effort and an incredible turnaround season and a Thunder squad that is somehow more than a team, not the fact that the score was a point lower than the visitors' on the \$3.9 million Daktronics scoreboard.

"I'd do anything for these guys and vice-versa," says Durant. "Guys that you go into battle with every night can't just be teammates for me. I'd dive on the floor and hurt myself for one of those guys."

"They're going to be together," says Brooks. "They're going to have barbecues and buckets of licorice and they're going to be playing video games. They have a brotherhood that you don't want ever to be broken."

That team-first, it's-not-about-me philosophy is for real, says Rick Barnes, Durant's coach at the University of Texas.

"He was unequivocally the best teammate we've ever had at Texas," says Barnes, whose university retired Durant's jersey, number 35 (chosen by Durant to commemorate a childhood coach shot to death at age thirty-five), less than a week after the NBA draft. "He had some phenomenal games for us where you'd just sit

RED-DIRT TRANSPLANT
Raised in the Washington, D.C., area, Kevin Durant has embraced life in Oklahoma City and embodies those qualities most associated with Oklahomans. Confidence, humility, and hard work are the KD standard.

in awe. But when it was over, he'd either give credit to the point guard for giving him a pass when he needed it or to one of his teammates for setting a screen to get him open. He always wanted to make sure they knew that they mattered to him and he appreciated their value."

This past fall, *Sports Illustrated* approached Durant about putting him on the cover of the NBA preview issue. No problem, KD said—provided *SI* would agree to let teammates Nenad Krstic and Thabo Sefolosha share the cover with him.

Lee Jenkins, a Los Angeles-based writer for *SI* who wrote the cover story for the October 25 issue, admits to falling hard for the Thunder's small-market-team-makes-good Cinderella story during last season's playoffs—so much so that he was rooting for the boys from Oklahoma City to beat the home team and nominated Durant for the magazine's Sportsman of the Year award. More than anything, he was struck by the contrast Durant embodied without even trying.

“I can't put into words how cool it is to be here, man.”

"This summer, considering that the NBA was a little out of control, he represented a sort of understated grace," Jenkins says. "Everything he stood for seemed more powerful."

The particular contrast Jenkins is referring to is the ruckus surrounding LeBron James' much-hyped, hour-long televised announcement that he was leaving Cleveland for the more championship-friendly, star-studded environs of the Miami Heat. Durant, on the other hand, shared the news about re-upping his contract on Twitter (see sidebar, page 45).

Kevin Durant, of course, would be the last person to criticize James' decision. The two are friends, and despite the fact that pretty much everyone in the NBA universe has named him James' MVP heir

apparent, Durant has stated publicly on more than one occasion that he believes he is nowhere near the level of play King James brings to the court.

That doesn't stop the reigning MVP from giving Durant his due.

"KD is an amazing athlete who really knows how to play the game," says James. "Besides being an unbelievable talent, he's a great guy who understands what it means to be a role model. Oklahoma City is lucky to have KD."

FUNNY THE WAY things turn out. One of Oklahoma City's biggest cheerleaders may be Oklahoma City's biggest, at least in the sense of tallest, cheerleader.

"He's very cognizant that he wears the city's name on his jersey," says Presti.

"What he did in the world games put us on a world stage," says Brooks. "He represented our city well. We're lucky to have a guy who believes in the right things and believes in the community and constantly gives back."

"Right now, there's no question in my mind that he wants to finish his career right there in Oklahoma City," says Barnes. "He doesn't want to go anywhere."

What does Durant have to say about Oklahoma, the place he's called home for just over two years now?

"I can't put into words how cool it is to be here, man," he says. "A lot of people don't really think too much about Oklahoma, but once they come here, they're overwhelmed. I brought a couple of my friends out, and they didn't want to leave."

So they didn't. Durant's brother Tony, a friend from the University of Texas, and a childhood buddy from D.C. have formed something of an NBA entourage centered around Casa Durant and Oklahoma City.

Even Durant's mother, Wanda Pratt, is considering leaving the nation's capital, her longtime home, for Oklahoma.

He's the franchise, after all, and the bases of that franchise are a skating rink-turned-NBA practice facility in Edmond, a big house in Gaillardia, the hardwoods of the Oklahoma City Arena—and the mighty heart of Kevin Durant.

"I'm happy I'm here," says Durant. "God has put me in a great place because it's the perfect place for me." 