

# Cementing a Legacy

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Blessed with the most dominant and complete game in the NBA right now, Kevin Durant is unlike anything we've ever seen for many reasons. First and foremost, his ability to shoot from any range at the highest of levels puts him in company with Dirk Nowitzki as the only 7-footers to possess this ability. As a 4-time NBA Scoring Champion, 2-time Finals MVP, and the 2014 NBA MVP, Durant has even dethroned LeBron as the best player in the world right now. Shifting to the win column, his move to the Warriors in 2016 virtually made 25 NBA franchises irrelevant before the reign of their dynasty even began, and the team will likely go on to win their 3<sup>rd</sup> title in as many years he's been with the team. Piling up all of these accolades plus too many others to be named, KD is unique to the NBA in another major way that many people don't recognize.

Drawing far less attention or discussion, Kevin Durant is the most INCOMPLETE superstar there's ever been. Having very little to do with his on the court abilities, Durant has been faced with this dilemma in several ways over the years. Dating as far back as high school, Kevin has been challenged with the fate of second fiddle throughout the entirety of his career and has only one way to flip the script. Laying out all of his potential free agent destinations for this upcoming offseason, I will explain the necessary steps KD must take in order to rewrite the narrative of his legacy.

## Playing for Second



Going as far back as his high school basketball days in Maryland, Kevin Durant has been slapped with the label as second best. As the number two recruit in the nation behind Greg Oden, he signed to play college ball at the University of Texas looking to distinguish himself as the best in his class. In a breakout freshman season, Kevin would take over college basketball as he went on to win the Wooden Award, the Naismith Award, and the AP Player of the Year while leading all Power 5 players with 25.1 points per game. His fate as runner up would not end here however, as he entered the NBA Draft following his lone season at UT and was selected 2<sup>nd</sup> overall, once again behind Greg Oden.

Early in his NBA career, he shined and brought life to the Thunder in their early years after the franchise moved from Seattle to Oklahoma City. Compiling all kinds of accolades in his first few years in the league, KD started a run of three consecutive NBA scoring titles before he was even old enough to drink. Despite lighting up the stat sheets, Durant was outshined at the end of the season by LeBron James, finishing runner up behind him in the NBA Finals in 2012, and in MVP voting in both 2012 and 2013. Naturally, these outcomes solidified Durant's status once again as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Best, this time in the conversation for best player in the league.

With the continuing domination of LeBron James combined with growing tensions with teammate Russell Westbrook, Kevin knew he would have to make a change in order to challenge LeBron for the throne. After blowing a 3-1 series lead in the Western Conference Finals and being eliminated by the Warriors, the window of opportunity arrived as he entered the offseason as a free agent. Later that summer, he would go on to make a decision that would not only change the course of his career, but also create a power shift that would shock the entire NBA.

Rolling with the slogan “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em”, KD agreed to team up with the Splash Brothers and signed with the Golden State Warriors after their historic 73-9 season. Joining forces with the league’s unanimous MVP and two other All-Stars, Durant and the Warriors united with the common goal of taking down the man that bested both of them in the Finals, LeBron James. Before he played a single game in a Golden State uniform, every follower of the NBA knew that this unprecedented move created a dynasty that couldn’t be stopped for years to come.

Hitting their stride from the beginning, this new and improved version of the Golden State Warriors took no time in establishing their prowess as they posted a 67-15 record in their first regular season since adding KD. This would only spell the beginning of their run, as they blew away all playoff competition by sweeping all three of their opponents in the Western Conference Playoffs leading up to the NBA Finals. Here, they would get their long awaited chance to take on the LeBron James and an outmatched Cleveland Cavaliers team. Sure enough, the one man show of the Cavaliers put on the best individual performance in NBA Finals history, however it was no match for the arsenal of All-Stars the Warriors put together the previous offseason. After besting Cleveland in 4 of 5 hard fought games, Durant and the Warriors dethroned the King and appeared to fill the glaring hole in KD’s résumé once and for all.

Earning Finals MVP and hoisting the Larry O’Brien Championship for the first time, Durant reached the highest peak in the game, but still failed to gain the respect and recognition he’d been longing for. The next season, the team followed the same script, defeating an inferior Cleveland team for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in 4 years, however the feat still lacked legitimacy in the eyes of most. The fact that KD was playing on a Super team with the reigning MVP, the 3-point contest champion, and two other All-Stars dampened the significance of defeating LeBron due to the disparity of their roster making the contest ‘unfair’. Outlandish as these claims may seem, the fact that Kevin Durant has never carried a team to an NBA Championship without the help of another MVP holds him back from holding the title of the Best Player in the World.

Going forward, Durant has one last chance to change the narrative of his legacy with his decision this summer in free agency. Where he chooses to play will not be an easy decision but will be very telling of what he truly wants out of this game. If he chooses to re-sign with the Warriors at a discounted rate, he will place himself in the position to win at least two more titles but will still face criticism and lack of recognition for truly earning them as crazy as it might sound. Although this would be the ‘smart’ decision if winning is his number one priority, I can’t help but thinking the impressions and perceptions of others are weighing on the mind of Kevin Durant. Frequently taking to the comment section of Twitter to debate fans of his honor, KD has proven how sensitive and fragile he is towards criticism of fans. This leads me to believe that there is a greater chance of him leaving for a new team this summer rather than staying and being complacent with a permanent stain on his record.

Exploring the options, I will provide the sales pitch each one of the front runners can offer in the wild free agent frenzy this July. Ultimately there is one opportunity in specific that I believe will remove label of second best, and even inject his name into the discussion for the greatest player of all time.



## The Case for Golden State



**The Pitch-** Staying in the Bay Area would definitely be the easiest choice for KD, as they can offer him the largest contract and the best chance to win more championships in the future. There is no question that the continuation of the KD-Steph-Klay-Draymond core has at least a couple more titles left in the tank. Around the NBA, there isn't currently a roster that is as talented or contains as much chemistry as this group, and it especially shows come playoff time every year. The fact that this team has a plethora of shooters around Durant that disables the opposing defenses from double teaming him is also an underrated benefit of re-signing with the Warriors. Even in an offense with three other mainstay All-Stars, Kevin Durant's numbers have not suffered since joining the Warriors as he's averaged 26 points, 7 rebounds, and 5 assists per game since joining the team in 2016. In fact, his name has even surfaced as the frontrunner in many conversations around the league as the best player in the world. Between the future championship potential, great roster composition and coaching, and the fact that his individual numbers haven't suffered, there is no question that Golden State should be the favorite to retain Durant due to the fact that they have the best package to offer. It should also be noted that the Warriors are opening play in a new arena next season right down the road from KD's San Francisco home.

Holding more cards in their hand than any other team, Golden State can offer everything to Kevin Durant except for the ability to prove he can win 'on his own'. What I mean by this isn't that he must join a roster of no-name guys and carry all of the weight for his team, but that he enlists the help of one other star and brings a title to a team that isn't already a contender. As ridiculous as this may seem, winning in this fashion would go a whole lot further in bolstering his legacy than enlisting the help of a 73 win dynasty and a starting 5 of All-Stars.

## The Case for the Clippers



**The Pitch-** Early on in the season, the team signaled that it was entering complete rebuild mode after letting DeAndre Jordan walk in free agency and trading away their best player Tobias Harris. In reality, it was the clever minds of Jerry West and Michael Winger clearing up cap space and creating two max contract slots for the greatest free agent class in NBA history. From there, the Clippers officially began their audition for Kevin Durant in the first round of the playoffs when their core of young talent pushed the full strength Warriors to six games. Shooting for the stars as LA does, the Clippers are honing their efforts into bringing in the best two players on the market in Kawhi Leonard and Kevin Durant, whose teams are both in the Finals this year. As a Los Angeles native, it is rumored that Kawhi has expressed his intentions to sign with his hometown team since before last season, and that he only played in Toronto to finish out his contract term. If this is the case, the ability to join the game's "best two-way player" in Kawhi Leonard as well as Montrezl Harrell and Lou Williams would instantly create a team worthy of earning a Top-2 seed in the West. Another perk to signing with this team would be the assurance of great management, as the owner Steve Ballmer and the front office as alluded to earlier has proven to be experts and savants in the industry.

Should Kevin Durant choose the Clippers come July, he wouldn't have to leave the fair weather of California as Los Angeles is just south of the San Francisco Bay. The big snag of signing with this team would be the continuing perception as a little brother to LeBron James, as he would be playing for the second biggest team in a shared arena with the man he is looking to surpass. If leaving the shadow of LeBron James is what Kevin Durant is set out to do, he should set his sights somewhere east of California or at least in a different city than him.

## The Case for the Knicks



**The Pitch-** The moment the offseason began a year ago, the number one headline amongst all major sports media networks has been what stars are rumored to end up with the Knicks. Names like Kyrie Irving, Anthony Davis, and Jimmy Butler have all swirled in rumors throughout the last year. As the league's most valuable team situated in the league's largest market, there isn't a bigger stage for Kevin Durant to take on than Madison Square Garden. With the most expected cap space in the NBA entering this summer, the Knicks could afford to sign Durant plus one or possibly two of the big names listed earlier to max deals. The Knicks also landed the number three draft pick in the lottery earlier this month, which could be cashed in for R.J. Barrett or packaged in a trade for Anthony Davis. On top of this, the team can offer a well respected coaching staff led by David Fizdale, plus the opportunity to play with Kevin Knox and Mitchell Robinson, who has proven to be a monster on the defensive end of the floor. In addition to this, I think it's a pretty safe bet to say Knicks fanbase will praise and cherish KD for the rest of his life for providing a gleam of hope for an organization that hasn't held any since the Patrick Ewing days.

Though I see this as a good opportunity to offer Durant the challenge he is looking for, I am gravely concerned about the dysfunctional management of owner James Dolan. While most fans can't name more than a few owners off the top of their heads, even casual NBA fans know Dolan's name to be synonymous with disaster and the reputation as the worst owner in the league. His name has regressed the organization down to the laughing stock of the league due to a lengthy track record of poor decision making. Because of this, I believe signing a long term contract with the Knicks would be a very poor business decision for KD that could leave him as disappointed as New Yorkers who have the displeasure of associating with this team.



## The Case for the Nets



**The Pitch-** The emergence of D'Angelo Russell as a rising star in the league boosted a young Brooklyn squad into an interesting playoff team when many thought of them as a lottery team entering last season. As a restricted free agent, it is possible he will be on the move this offseason, but there is a way he can benefit the Nets even if he doesn't suit up for them next season. Since D'Angelo Russell will likely receive a max contract offer on the open market and won't be enough to lure KD to Brooklyn on his own, the team should sign and trade him for a future first rounder and cash in on their gamble on him. From there, the team could shift its focus to bringing in All-NBA talent Kyrie Irving who happened grew up as a Nets fan and is rumored to have interest signing with the team. With the 3<sup>rd</sup> most cap space in the NBA, the Nets could then offer both Kyrie and KD max contracts, instantly becoming the favorites in a weaker Eastern Conference. On top of this, the Nets have quietly acquired some nice complimentary pieces such as Spencer Dinwiddie, Joe Harris, and Jarrett Allen on team friendly contracts.

Just one year ago, Brooklyn wasn't even mentioned as an afterthought in the conversation of major free agent destinations. After a year filled with exceeding expectations, I believe this organization has a blueprint to become the winner of the 2019 free agent frenzy and much more. A long suffering franchise with only one 50-win season since the ABA-NBA merger, this team provides Kevin Durant the perfect opportunity to uplift a team from irrelevance to an NBA Championship. Fitting in this missing puzzle piece into his résumé will officially clear all doubts regarding his pedigree not only as a player but also as a leader. For this reason, I believe the series of steps I laid out above will provide the best opportunity for Kevin Durant to erase the label of second best and reinvent himself on the level of Jordan and LeBron.