

# HOME TEAM

A LOT HAS CHANGED FOR THE OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER IN THE PAST YEAR, BUT THE ABIDING LOVE BETWEEN TEAM AND STATE HASN'T GONE ANYWHERE.

BY **NATHAN GUNTER**

## THUNDER DOME

When the Thunder hits the floor, the house is packed and always loud at the Chesapeake Energy Arena in Oklahoma City. Here, the team takes on the Phoenix Suns on October 28, 2016.

**I**T'S FOGGY AND cool in Tulsa—one of the year's first truly autumnal nights. A halo of blue and green light shines from the top of the First Place Tower against the orange, urban glow of a busy downtown. Traffic cops are helping with crowd control, and music blasts from a speaker stack. A school bus from Battiest—an unincorporated community in the mountainous reaches of McCurtain County—is parked on Third Street south of the BOK Center, where thousands of fans dressed in blue are filing in to watch the Oklahoma City Thunder take on the Memphis Grizzlies in a preseason matchup.

COURTESY OF THE THUNDER



“My job is now to worry about what’s in front of me,  
and that’s the **OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER.**”

“I hope this ain’t a runaway game,” one fan says to another as they settle into their seats in Section 317 in the arena’s upper deck. “It’d be nice if we got to see something happen.”

Behind them, a kid with an air horn blows rhythmic blasts until his father tells him to knock it off. Fans get situated with beer, personal pizzas, sodas, and foam fingers before a seventh-grade choir from Owasso sings the National Anthem. During the invocation, former Thunder player and Tulsa native Etan Thomas prays for national unity and the family of Terence Crutcher. In Section 317, there are whispers of, “Yes, Lord.”

Thomas finishes, and the reverent silence is broken by the opening riff of “Thunderstruck” by AC/DC, which itself nearly is drowned out by the deafening roar of the crowd.

Among the throngs of screaming people are self-described mega-fans Clint Cothorn and his girlfriend Jenni Robinson, who have been dating for three years. Though they live in Tulsa, they drive down to Oklahoma City to watch a game whenever they can get tickets.

“I’ll get a call from her, and she’ll say, ‘Hey, tickets are cheap tonight, let’s go,’” says Cothorn. “We’re pretty big fans.”

But these Tulsans say it’s nice to see a game in their own city for a change. Though this is a preseason game, and the team’s stars aren’t expected to see much court time this evening, there is a rowdy, electric energy inside the BOK Center. In the first quarter, when Russell Westbrook scores eight straight points, the crowd begins to chant, “OKC! OKC! OKC!”

This is the eighth time the Thunder have played at the BOK Center, so it very well

**Rumble the Bison was given the NBA Mascot of the Year award in 2009. When he’s not armed with a T-shirt cannon and pumping up the arena crowd, Rumble makes regular public appearances around the state.**

may be the eighth time in Oklahoma history that Tulsans have chanted the name of the capital city at a deafening volume.

“OKC! OKC! OKC! OKC!”

They stomp their feet with every syllable. They clap with every letter. The floor shakes. Ears ring. It’s a towering noise. Tonight, the whole state is Loud City.

**F**OR BASKETBALL FANS in Oklahoma, 2016 was not the best year. Reading Thunder fans’ Facebook updates last summer felt a little like reading the lyrics to an angry breakup song.

Then came August 4. That day, Russell Westbrook came bounding through a crowd of nearly 1,500 fans in oppressive summer heat outside the Chesapeake Energy Arena to announce he’d signed a three-year, 85.7 million-dollar contract extension. Hopping jauntily onto a stage outside the ‘Peake, he grabbed a microphone and said, “You guys are the best fans in the world.”

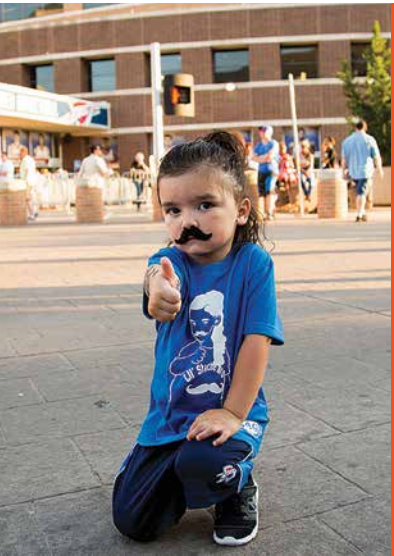
Then he took a selfie with the crowd, who boomed noisy love at him. One fan carried a sign that read, “Welcome home! Need anything? Snack? Drink? My firstborn?” Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett declared it “Russell Westbrook Day.” Throughout the press conference that followed, Westbrook returned the love to his newly readopted city.

“Me being able to come back here is a true blessing; there’s nowhere else I’d rather be than Oklahoma City,” he said. “You guys have basically kinda raised me; I’ve been here since I was eighteen, nineteen years old. You’ve done nothing but good things for me through the good times and the bad.”

Westbrook also used that moment to look forward rather than behind.

“My job is now to worry about what’s in front of me, and that’s the Oklahoma City Thunder, my team, the guys we have here, and focus on how we can improve as a team,” he said.

“This team, this organization, this city, this state is like a family to me. I feel like this is **MY HOMETOWN NOW.**”



A young fan shows off his Steven Adams costume at Thunder Alley pre-game festivities.

LORI DUCKWORTH

**F**OR ENES KANTER, 2016 was the year that proved how much his team and community had his back. In July, a faction within the armed forces of his native Turkey staged a coup d'état against president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The effort eventually was unsuccessful, but Kanter's vocal support for Pennsylvania-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, whose followers were blamed for the coup, caused his family to publicly disown him. For the affable Kanter—and the Thunder fans who embraced him after he was traded to the team from the Utah Jazz in 2015—that was the moment he became an Okie.

“People were tweeting at me and saying, ‘Hey man, we’ve got an extra bed if you want to come join our family,’” Kanter says. “This team, this organization, this city, this state, is like a family to me. I feel like this is my hometown now.”

Like his new hometown, the Thunder organization has responded. After his family's statement made international news, Kanter's coaches and fellow players texted him messages of support. The team has honored his Muslim faith by setting up prayer rooms in its practice facility and arena and by providing halal meals and protein shakes, accommodations Kanter says have helped him feel at home and focus on basketball. But he was impressed by Oklahoma City even before he joined the team.

“When I was playing for Utah, I was like, ‘OKC has the loudest fans,’” he says. “I never wanted to play against OKC—they had Russell, they had all these other guys and were a really good team. Then after I got traded here, I was like, ‘This is amazing.’ Last year during the playoffs, the crowd helped us a lot. It was like a sixth man playing for us.”

Nauzi Jagosh may embody that signature intensity more than any other fan. Known as the “Thunder Princess,” Jagosh sits in section 101, dresses in a sparkling tiara and orange and blue tutu and heckles opposing

players from behind the goal. She became the face of Oklahoma City fandom in 2014, when an animated .gif of her courtside reaction during the NBA Western Conference Finals went viral.

“Where I sit, I can hear the players talking, and I want to give everything they’re giving,” she says. “If I can get one of the other team’s players to miss even one free throw by being so uninhibited, that’s great.”

Jagosh is part of a hard-core fandom that’s been noted in nearly every major story written about the team since 2008. As the only remaining Thunder player ever to wear a Seattle jersey, Nick Collison knows the difference it makes.

“The best experiences are being on the court late in the game, important games, playoff games, where we go on an incredible run and the place is so loud,” Collison says. “My favorite is at the end, you know you’re going to win, and they give you a standing ovation. It’s really a cool feeling.”

The players repay the love with a quintessentially Oklahoman work ethic.

“They give to us, and we give to them,” says Andre Roberson. “In Oklahoma, it’s either OU or OSU, and we kinda unite those two groups. The Thunder brings everybody together and gives everybody something to cheer about.”

**C**HEER MIGHT NOT be the right word. Roar is a better way to describe the sound when, in the regular-season home opener against Phoenix on October 28, Victor Oladipo steps to the line for two free throws, scoring the Thunder's first two points. When Oladipo, the team's newest guard, dunks later in the first quarter, the sound is akin to a clap of, well, thunder.

In addition to playing for the Thunder and the Utah Jazz, Enes Kanter played for the Turkish national team in 2011.



COURTESY OF THE THUNDER



“I don’t think this is a rebuilding year.

**I THINK THEY’RE RELOADING.”**

For his part, Westbrook seems a player transformed. All the trademarks are there: the sneer, the energy, the intensity. And when Domantas Sabonis gets knocked on his tail during a scramble with Phoenix, Westbrook is at his side in a flash offering a hand. But while fans and commentators alike often had criticized Westbrook for being too hotheaded and getting in too big a hurry, it’s hard to miss how self-possessed he now seems, how much more zen.

What has changed? For his part, Westbrook demurs.

“One year older,” he says of the difference between this season opener and the one before. “My mental game hasn’t changed since I started playing basketball.”

Something feels different, though, and the fans feel it too. Every time Westbrook comes off the bench, the noise is deafening, shaking the floor like an earthquake. When Westbrook draws a foul in the fourth quarter and steps to the line, a woman in section 115 cries out, “Come on Russell!” The last syllable is an operatic note, and it rings through the arena as Westbrook plants his feet and takes his shot. A few minutes later, when the Thunder pull ahead 97-96 with 4:40 left in the game, the chants of “OKC! OKC! OKC!” are earsplitting. As the game closes—Oklahoma City will go on to defeat the Suns 113-110 in overtime—Westbrook raises one hand and wiggles his fingers just a bit. The fans pick up on the cue, and they open their lungs to the skies.

In this season opener against the Suns, Westbrook turns in an historic performance, becoming the first player to score a fifty-point triple-double since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in 1975. One year older looks good on him.

**Russell Westbrook, mid-dunk against the Houston Rockets on March 22, 2016, has emerged as the team’s leader. He was named the NBA All-Star Game’s Most Valuable Player in 2015 and 2016.**

**A**S THE SOONERS are holding off Iowa State’s football team on the screen over the bar, The Garage in Midtown Oklahoma City is filling up. One bartender is slinging Thunder Fries and Black Mesa beer, while another is running around the restaurant, switching TVs away from any channel that isn’t carrying the Thunder game. Even the Sooner fans in the room don’t seem to mind—their team is on its way to victory, and the real show is about to start. Every seat in the place is full, and as the broadcast begins, the room gets rowdy. One guy in the bar shouts, “Let’s go Thunder!” It’s November 3, and the Thunder are playing the Golden State Warriors for the first time this season.

Philip Kemp and DaMarques Potter, like the rest of Thunder Nation, have been intensely anticipating this matchup.

“There’s a lot of drama to it,” Kemp says. “It’s like a soap opera now.”

At the start of this game, the Thunder stand at 4-0 and are the only undefeated team in the Western Conference. The fan base is encouraged but anxious.

“I don’t think this is a rebuilding year,” says Potter. “I think they’re reloading. At this point, it’s back to a grass roots progression. It’s gonna be a blue-collar team.”

However the team looks going forward, that never-give-up spirit always will be the Thunder’s legacy in a state that prizes hard work above all else. When the broadcast begins, everyone in the bar seems to be holding a breath. Then Steven Adams nails a shot for the team’s first two, and it’s another little Loud City in this burger joint. The sound for which the team is named explodes through the restaurant.

The Thunder rolls on.

*The Oklahoma City Thunder play the Golden State Warriors at the Chesapeake Energy Arena in Oklahoma City at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, February 11. For tickets, broadcast information, and a full season schedule, visit [nba.com/thunder](http://nba.com/thunder).*

# Nick Collison

FORWARD

### HOW DID YOU CHOOSE JERSEY NUMBER 4?

In high school, I wore number 44, because that was the jersey they threw to me, but when I got to college, 44 was taken, so I just stuck with the one 4.

### WHICH OF YOUR TEAMMATES HAS THE BEST FACIAL HAIR AT THE MOMENT?

Steven Adams has the grossest facial hair.

### WHAT'S THE LAST CONCERT YOU SAW?

Jay-Z and Kanye West at Madison Square Garden

### WHO'S THE FIRST PERSON YOU CALL WHEN YOU HAVE GREAT NEWS TO SHARE?

My mom



NBA/GETTY IMAGES/GARY DINEEN

# Josh Huestis

FORWARD

### DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL MOTTO OR MANTRA?

Life is a marathon, not a sprint.

### WHAT WAS THE FIRST MAJOR PURCHASE YOU MADE AS AN ADULT?

It was probably my first car.

### WHAT'S THE MOST INTERESTING CLASS YOU TOOK IN COLLEGE?

Early Childhood Development

### WHAT SONG OR ARTIST GETS YOU MOTIVATED BEFORE A GAME?

Right now, it's probably Drake.

### WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE PLACE YOU'VE BEEN TO IN OKLAHOMA SO FAR?

My favorite restaurant is Mahogany Prime Steakhouse. I love going there.

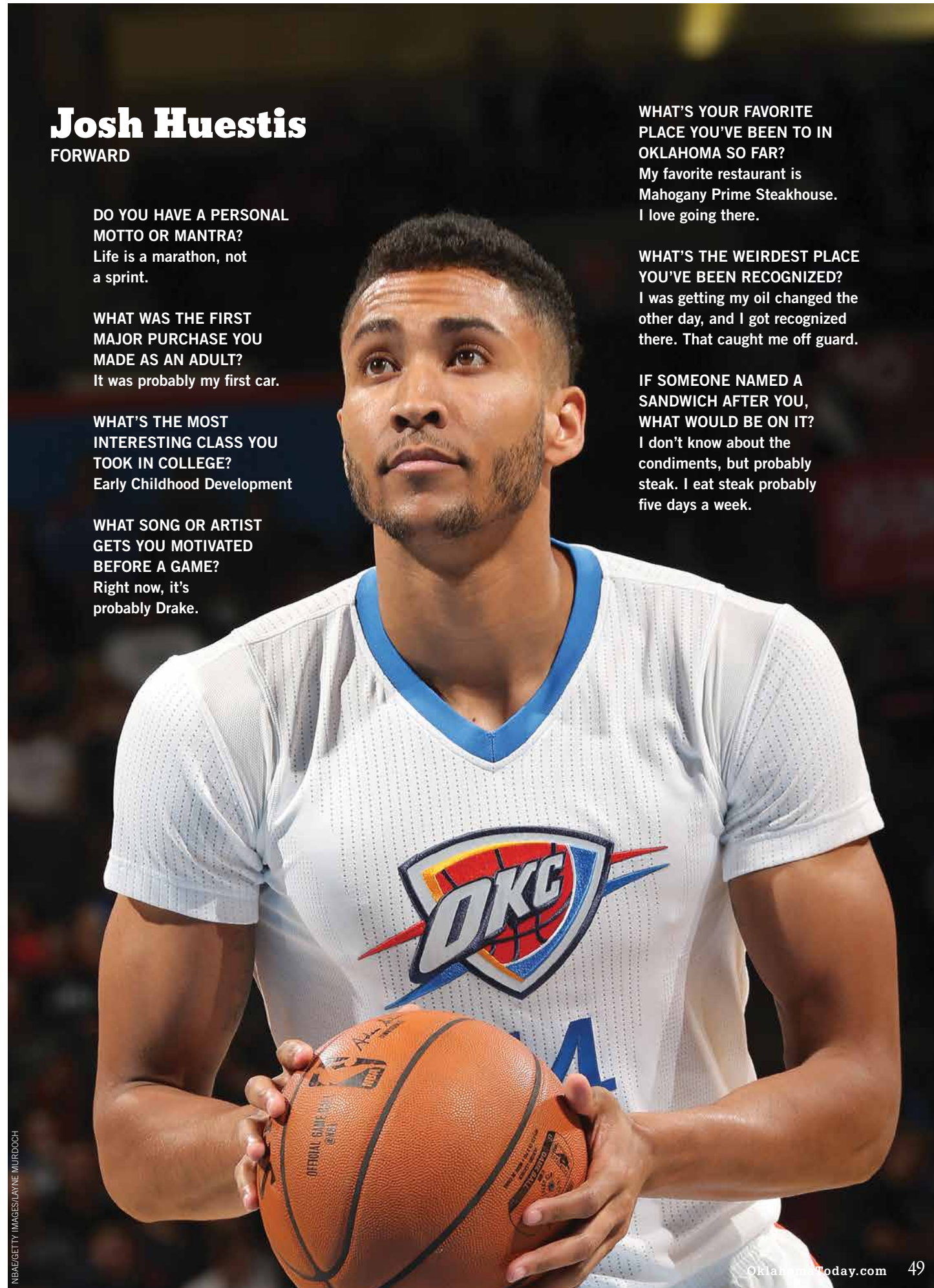
### WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST PLACE YOU'VE BEEN RECOGNIZED?

I was getting my oil changed the other day, and I got recognized there. That caught me off guard.

### IF SOMEONE NAMED A SANDWICH AFTER YOU, WHAT WOULD BE ON IT?

I don't know about the condiments, but probably steak. I eat steak probably five days a week.

NBA/GETTY IMAGES/JAYNE MURDOCH



# Steven Adams

CENTER



**HOW DO YOU PASS TIME ON LONG PLANE RIDES?**  
Watch movies and play video games

**WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT THIS THUNDER TEAM?**  
The diverse culture that we have.  
The diversity in the team

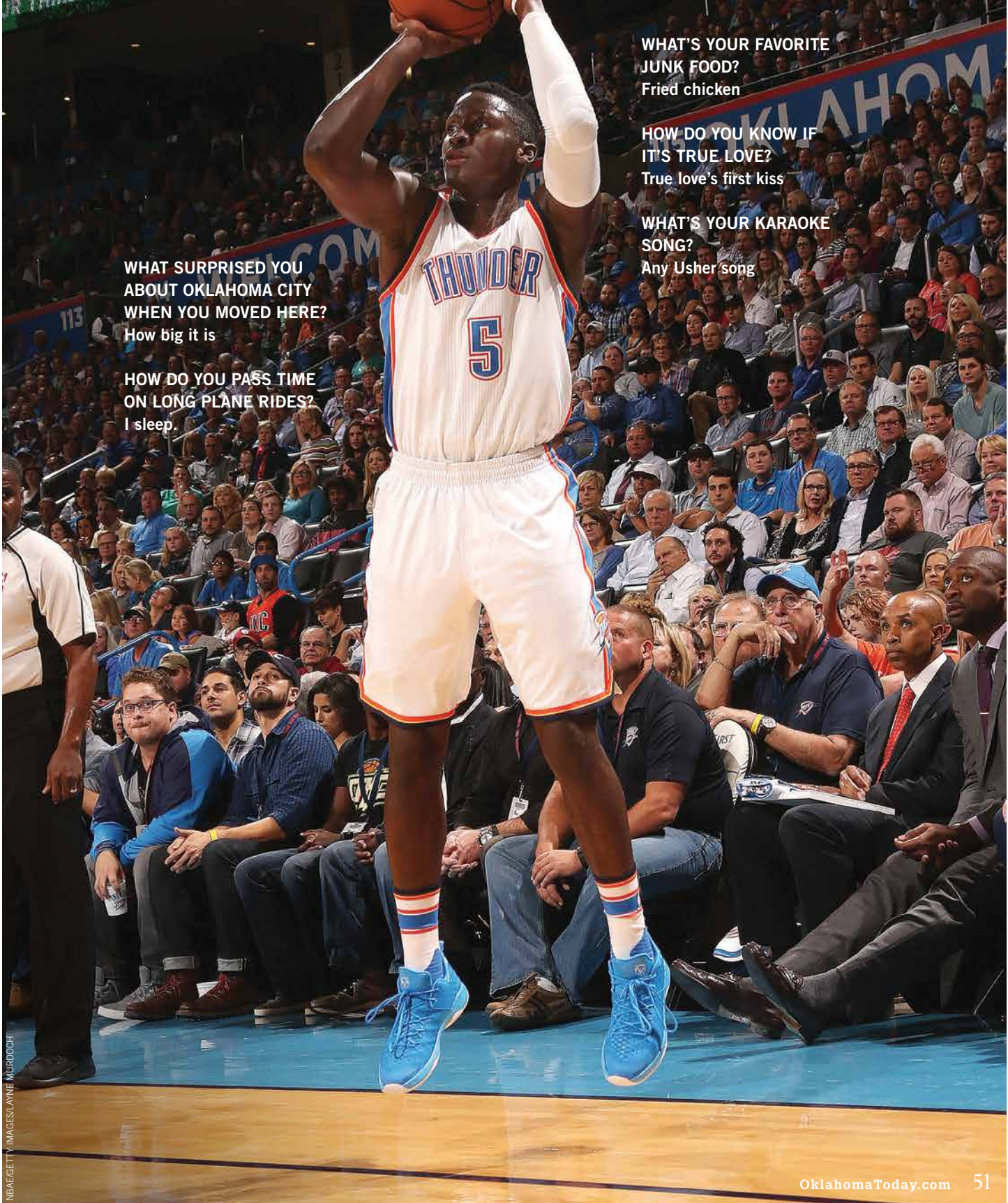
**WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE JUNK FOOD?**  
I don't actually eat junk food. Probably the worst junk food, probably gummies

**WHAT'S YOUR KARAOKE SONG?**  
"500 Miles" by the Proclaimers

COURTESY OF THE THUNDER

# Victor Oladipo

GUARD



**WHAT SURPRISED YOU ABOUT OKLAHOMA CITY WHEN YOU MOVED HERE?**  
How big it is

**HOW DO YOU PASS TIME ON LONG PLANE RIDES?**  
I sleep.

**WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE JUNK FOOD?**  
Fried chicken

**HOW DO YOU KNOW IF IT'S TRUE LOVE?**  
True love's first kiss

**WHAT'S YOUR KARAOKE SONG?**  
Any Usher song

NBA/GETTY IMAGES/LAYNE MURDOCH



Enes Kanter and the rest of the Thunder squad work with organizations like the Salvation Army and the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma during the annual Holiday Assist.

COURTESY OF THE THUNDER

## COMMUNITY ASSIST

WITH LOVE OF COMMUNITY BUILT INTO THE TEAM'S CULTURE, THE OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER PLAYERS AND STAFF ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE ACROSS OKLAHOMA.

BY MICHAEL KINNEY

**A**FTER MORE THAN three seasons with the Utah Jazz, Enes Kanter thought he knew what it meant to be in the NBA. But when he was traded to Oklahoma City in February 2015, Kanter quickly found out the Thunder does things a little differently than other franchises. While the organization strives for championships and banners, it also wants to be a leader in the community.

"We really didn't do as much community work in Utah," Kanter says. "I get to the Thunder, and we have something to do almost every other day."

Kanter's experience is not unique. This was evident in September 2016, when the Thunder held its annual Blue and White Scrimmage at Oklahoma City's John Marshall Mid High. Each year, the team picks an Oklahoma location to host a scrimmage on its basketball court. At this year's game, the Thunder Cares Foundation—the team's charitable arm—donated \$5,000 to help replace John Marshall's scoreboards. But the event had a deeper meaning: In 2015, John Marshall student C.J. Davis was killed in a car accident, and the sixteen-year-old athlete's death devastated his family and the student body.

"I know that family very well; that was the worst day of my professional life," says Edith Vickers, John Marshall athletic coordinator.

At the scrimmage, Thunder general manager Sam Presti presented Davis' family with a jersey bearing his team number.

But the Blue and White Scrimmage is just one of many ways the Thunder and its players help communities around the state. Members of the team take part in more than 200 charitable events each year. In fact, Oklahoma City consistently ranks in the top three of all NBA teams in player community appearances.

"Our overall philosophy is organization-wide," says Christine Berney, the team's vice president of community relations. "It's not just one person, and it's not just the players. The whole organization has bought into the importance of being a good community partner."

Some of the team's events include a spring outing in which players and staff volunteer throughout the community, as well as the Holiday Shopping Spree. Players and Thunder Girls are paired with children and the grandparents who are raising them for shopping trips through Target.

"The families get shopping on us," Berney says. "The kids get off and have fun with the players, take them to the toy aisle. The grandparents also get a chance to shop for themselves. I've never gotten through that event without crying."

It's not just the franchise that seeks to give back. Several players have charitable foundations doing good work around the world. The Russell Westbrook Why Not? Foundation has hosted Thanksgiving dinners for underprivileged families, donated a car to a single mother, and created Russell's Reading Room, a literacy initiative that provides children in low-income areas access to books and a safe environment to read with friends.

"I feel blessed and honored to see my name and pictures around," Westbrook told the *Norman Transcript* after opening his first reading room at North Highland Elementary School in Oklahoma City. "Especially for young kids, I think it's important for them to have access to different books and to be able to come into my reading room. It's my job to be able to encourage them to read more."

Other players who have foundations or host camps and events include Enes Kanter, Steven Adams, Anthony Morrow, Victor Oladipo, Cameron Payne, Andre Roberson, and Kyle Singler. And after the devastating 2013 tornado outbreak, players quickly came to affected areas to help out.

"We live in a special place," Berney says. "We feel the support of the fans and the community here. We like to think of ourselves as part of the fabric of Oklahoma, so it's important to us to give back. It's something we love to do."

To learn more about the Thunder Cares Foundation, visit [okcthunder.com/community](http://okcthunder.com/community).



Andre Roberson lends a hand during Holiday Assist.

COURTESY OF THE THUNDER



Russell Westbrook and Nick Collison help students at Orvis Risner Elementary School in Edmond pick out reading materials on the Rolling Thunder Book Bus.

NBA/GETTY IMAGES/LAYNE MURDOCH

# THE HUNGER ROLLS

LOOKING TO BEAT AN EMPTY STOMACH WHILE CHEERING ON YOUR FAVORITE TEAM? FILL UP WHILE YOU THUNDER UP WITH THESE TWELVE BURSTING-WITH-TEAM-SPIRIT DISHES AT OKLAHOMA RESTAURANTS.

BY **ASHLEY STEWART**

**ARDMORE**

**Carter's Grill**

Sometimes the couch can't compare to a congregation of fans screaming, "Thunder!" In Ardmore, Carter's Grill feeds both stomach and team spirit with more than just delicious burgers, nachos, and catfish. Eighteen televisions show fan favorite matchups, while the kitchen prepares pulled pork, wings, and rib eye with pitchers and buckets of cold brew—as well as wine and a full bar—to wash it all down. **2207 NORTH ROCKFORD ROAD, (580) 221-5170 OR ARDMORESBESTGRILL.COM.**

**EDMOND**

**Jo's Famous Pizza**

Game time isn't complete without the staples: pizza and Buffalo wings. Get the best of both from Jo's Famous Pizza. The Thunder Pizza combines spicy grilled chicken in Louisiana Hot Sauce with the zesty combo of mozzarella and blue cheese. Grab fourths, thirds, halves, or a whole pie for the center-court position on any snack spread. Claim a slice—and make sure to guard it. **900 SOUTH KELLY AVENUE, (405) 340-7070 OR JOSFAMOUSPIZZA.COM.**

**EDMOND**

**Let's Do Greek**

Ditch pizza rolls and Doritos for the fresh-daily quality of Let's Do Greek and the mouthwatering Thunder Gyro: fluffy pita bread cradling gyro meat and grilled ham topped with feta, onions, and tomatoes drizzled with a spicy Thunder sauce. Can't get enough? Order a side of smothered Thunder Fries with feta, Thunder sauce, and oregano. Add Thunder Hummus for an extra kick. **180 WEST FIFTEENTH STREET, (405) 285-8898 OR LETSDOGREEK.COM.**

**ELK CITY**

**Big Splash Burgers**

For some, a plain quarter-pounder is enough, but a true fan needs a burger that booms. Big Splash Burgers delivers with its Thunder Burger, which pairs a pretzel bun

with pepper jack cheese melted on a half-pound of Angus beef, bacon, and jalapeños. But Big Splash's Boom Boom Sauce adds the real kick with cayenne and chili de arbol pepper. **201 SOUTH PIONEER ROAD, (580) 225-2526 OR FACEBOOK.COM/BIGSPLASHBURGERS.**

**MUSKOGEE**

**Lopez Grill**

Didn't think loaded fries could get any better? Head to Lopez Grill for a lip-smacking Mexican menu packed with spicy, sweet, and succulent flavors. For an appetizer, grab the Thunder Fries, covered in melted and shredded cheese, chicken, beef, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, and sour cream. Share with the whole table, or play defense on the salty goodness. **323 SOUTH THIRTY-SECOND STREET IN MUSKOGEE. (918) 684-9973 OR LOPEZGRILL.COM.**



LORI DUCKWORTH

**NORMAN**

**Classic 50's Drive-in**

Not even winter can stop a strong thirst for a cold drink. Pull up to Classic 50's Drive-In and warm up with the best of edible Americana—juicy burgers, onion rings, fried okra, and loaded cheese fries—and wash it down with a Thunder Slush. A slurry of cream, blueberry syrup, and orange Dreamsicle electrifies the taste buds. Upgrade with gummy bears or

**Above, the Thunder Slush at Classic 50's Drive-in in Norman; right, the Thunder Gyro at Let's Do Greek in Edmond**



The Thunder Fries at The Garage, which has 11 locations across the state

NATHAN GUNTER



LORI DUCKWORTH





LORI DUCKWORTH

Skittles for bright bursts of flavor. 1521 WEST LINDSEY STREET, (405) 321-2271.

#### OKLAHOMA CITY

### Arbuckle Mountain Original Fried Pies

Sports aside, pie is America's favorite pastime—but forget apple. The Thunder Pie at Arbuckle Mountain Original Fried Pies has a creamy burst of peaches and vanilla pudding under a warm, flaky crust. Call ahead to get a hot, fresh pie ready and waiting. For those preparing a smorgasbord for all their Thunder-loving friends, pies are cheaper by the dozen.

3721 NORTHWEST FIFTIETH STREET IN OKLAHOMA CITY, (405) 946-1300.

#### OKLAHOMA CITY

### Big Truck Tacos

The verdict is in when it comes to burritos: Bigger is better. At Big Truck Tacos, the Thunder Burrito hits the plate with a resounding clap. Stuffed with beef picadillo, refried beans, pico de gallo, fried potatoes, jalapeños, guacamole, and a blend of cheeses, this behemoth is guaranteed to satisfy. On Tuesdays, order the Blazing Thunder Taco, with boneless fried chicken in spicy wing sauce and blue cheese *crema*, celery pico de gallo, and lettuce. 530

NORTHWEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET IN OKLAHOMA CITY, (405) 525-8226 OR BIGTRUCKTACOS.COM.

#### OKLAHOMA CITY

### Nhinja Sushi & Wok

It's hard to get away from the television during the game, but with five locations in the Oklahoma City area, Nhinja Sushi & Wok makes it nearly effortless. Order online or by phone to pick up the restaurant's MVP, the Thunder Roll, filled with flaky tempura shrimp and fresh avocado, topped with juicy crab stick, and smothered in spicy mayonnaise. Sneak

The spicy Thunder roll at Nhinja Sushi & Wok provides a perfect intro for those who've never tried sushi, as it is cooked and not raw.



LORI DUCKWORTH

away at halftime and have a full belly by the third quarter. NHINJA.COM.

#### STATEWIDE

### The Garage

When going out for a drink, a dozens-deep craft beer list and a wall of televisions are worth the trip on their own, but The Garage has something else for the feisty Oklahoma City fan. The Thunder Fries, with blue cheese and chopped bacon blended in a sriracha aioli on a crunchy bouquet of fresh-cut fries, will help any fan stay pumped. (405)

701-7035 OR EATATTHEGARAGE.COM.

#### STILLWATER

### J.R. Murphy's

Even in basketball, there's a wind-up. Waiting until 6:00, 7:00, or even 9:30 p.m. for the game to start can wreck the nerves. Wind down at J.R. Murphy's by racking up at one of the pool tables with friends, and treat pregame anxiety with the bar's Thunder Up shot: Sprite fizzing with blueberry Schnapps and vodka. Order a round in preparation for Russell Westbrook's brutal dunks. 306 SOUTH WASHINGTON STREET IN STILLWATER, (405) 743-2983.

#### TULSA

### Fat Guy's Burger Bar

A good burger has a juicy patty, but the very best burger—like the one at Fat Guy's Burger Bar—has two. The Thunder Burger takes it further with a slice of bologna, cheddar cheese, grilled onions, bacon, and a creamy Thunder barbecue sauce full of heat. 140 NORTH GREENWOOD AVENUE, (918) 794-7782 OR FATGUYSBURGERS.COM.

The Thunder Fries at Lopez Grill in Muskogee