

Analysis: Westbrook, Harden will need to change their games

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
AP Basketball Writer

LAS VEGAS — Everyone knows that Russell Westbrook and James Harden played together before, which automatically makes their reunion in Houston seem like the right fit.

It won't be that easy. They've both changed since those days.

But here they are, together again after the Oklahoma City Thunder decided to trade Westbrook to the Houston Rockets for Chris Paul and another load of draft picks that Sam Presti is collecting in the same way that sneakerheads hoard vintage pairs of Jordans. On the surface, it's a shiny move for Houston — two of the last three NBA MVPs, the two guys with the most points over the last five seasons, in the same backcourt.

Per NBA rules, there will only be one ball in play, however.

The term they use is "ball dominant," a fancy way of saying certain players need the ball in their hands more than others. Westbrook and Harden are two of those guys. Harden held the ball for nearly 6½ seconds — a league high — and took nearly six dribbles, on average, every time he touched it last season. Westbrook typically held the ball for 5.1 seconds, taking nearly five dribbles every time it was in his hands.

That can't continue. They're both going to have to change.

And getting big-time stars to change is never easy.

The Rockets know this, of course, but in a Western Conference that saw Kawhi Leonard and Paul George join the Los Angeles Clippers, Anthony Davis join the Los Angeles Lakers and Kevin Durant leave Golden



AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki, File

In this Jan. 25, 2012, file photo, Oklahoma City Thunder guard James Harden, left, talks with teammate Russell Westbrook in the fourth quarter of an NBA basketball game in Oklahoma City.

State, they had to do something. Harden and Paul, for whatever reason, didn't work out. Title-chasing teams like Houston aren't inclined to be patient, so the Rockets took a big swing and brought on Westbrook.

It's believed that this is a trade both Westbrook and Harden wanted. When the Thunder decided to deal George to the Clippers in a move that all but announced that Westbrook would be gone next, it made sense that teaming up with Harden again would be an option.

That makes for a nice story: former teammates getting back together.

These versions of Westbrook and Harden, however, have never been teammates before.

They were kids when they spent the first three seasons of Harden's career together in Oklahoma City. They were making around \$4 million a year, not \$4 million a month. Westbrook was just becoming an

All-Star. Harden hadn't yet reached that level. And they had Durant on those OKC teams, the last of which was good enough to get to the NBA Finals and get swiftly taken out by Miami in five games.

There's no Durant this time to help their cause.

Plus, sure, they spent those three years together in Oklahoma City, but Harden's role was so much different then. He and Westbrook started together in seven games over those three seasons.

Superstar duos are all the rage right now in the NBA, a basic necessity for any team interested in winning a title. Harden had them before in Houston: It was him and Dwight Howard for a while, him and Paul for the last couple of years — not to mention him, Paul and Carmelo Anthony for 10 games this past season before the Rockets gave up on the 'Melo experiment.

None of them for Harden

worked as planned.

This one had better be different, for Houston's sake. Westbrook only gets older and more expensive every year from here, meaning if this partnership doesn't work it could be difficult for the Rockets to move him and try to create yet another star duo for Harden. This move means the Rockets are all in — championship or bust.

Harden is elite but has no rings yet.

Westbrook is elite but has no rings yet.

They'll be happy now to be together again, they'll be all smiles at media day in September and they will have a super-cool handshake to show off on national television on opening night in October.

Whether they'll still be smiling come next April, May and June is contingent on both of them being willing to change their games in order to make this work.

Otherwise, it'll be the same old results yet again.

Hassan breaks women's mile world record; Gatlin wins 100

MONACO (AP) — Sifan Hassan broke the long-standing women's mile record in 4 minutes, 12.33 seconds at the Herculis Diamond League meeting on Friday.

The Dutchwoman fractionally beat the 4:12.56 set in 1996 by Svetlana Masterkova, a two-time Olympic champion that year in Atlanta.

Hassan knocked two seconds off her personal best and finished five seconds clear of Britain's Laura Weightman.

It was the first outdoor world record on the track so far this year.

She reached the 1,200-meter mark in 3:10.2 and pushed hard to clock a 62-second closing lap at Stade Louis II, the home of French soccer side Monaco.

Hassan was surprised, but thinks this result stands her in good stead for the world championships in Doha, Qatar, in late September.

"The first 800 was a bit slow, so after that I wasn't thinking it would be a world record," she said. "When I crossed the line I was so surprised. After you run the last 400 like that and set a world record, it gives me (you) much confidence over 5,000 ... I want to double over 1,500 and 5,000 in Doha."

In the men's 100 meters there was another win for world champion Justin Gatlin.

The 37-year-old Gatlin clocked 9.91 seconds to narrowly beat Noah Lyles in 9.92 — Gatlin's winning time last Friday at the Athletissima Diamond League in Lausanne.

Michael Rodgers made it a United States podium sweep with 10.01 for third, having run the same time in Lausanne.

"It's all about putting together a good technical

race, to use my experience. It feels great to beat these guys," said Gatlin, the 2004 Olympic champion. "This season is surreal; I can't believe I'm still winning here. Noah is a great runner, so every time I race him I'm excited."

In other men's results, Steven Gardiner of the Bahamas won the 400 meters in 44.51 seconds; Nijel Amos of Botswana clinched the 800 in 1:41.89 — the world-leading time this year — and Moroccan runner Soufiane El Bakkali won the 3,000 steeplechase in 8:04.82, another best for the year.

Poland's Piotr Lisek also had a year-leading 6.02 meters in pole vault and Germany's Andreas Hofmann won the javelin throw with 87.84 meters.

"I didn't expect 6.02. It's almost a dream," said Lisek, who also set a personal best. "I've been injury free this year and 100% healthy."

Christian Taylor won the triple jump in 17.82 meters ahead of U.S. countryman Will Claye, 17.75.

The U.S. got another 1-2 in the women's 400 hurdles, with Sydney McLaughlin (53.32 seconds) comfortably beating Ashley Spencer (54.46). Meanwhile, countrywoman Kendra Harrison ran 12.43 to win the women's 100 hurdles ahead of Jamaica's Danielle Williams (12.52) with both having season's bests.

Shaunae Miller-Uibo secured another victory for the Bahamas, this time in the 200 meters, clocking 22.09 seconds to beat Olympic champion Elaine Thompson of Jamaica, 22.44.

Two-time defending world champion Mariya Lasitskene of Russia, competing as a neutral athlete, won the high jump with 2 meters.

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