

# THUNDER

**FORGET ZEUS. Oklahoma has a HOME-GROWN THUNDER GOD of its own. As chairman of Oklahoma's first and only MAJOR-LEAGUE franchise, CLAYTON I. BENNETT commands a MONSTER storm the likes of which Oklahoma has never seen, the Oklahoma City Thunder NBA BASKETBALL TEAM.**

## OKLAHOMAN *of the* YEAR

*By Steffie Corcoran*

**D**ORIC COLUMNS provide a Greek ambiance to the top-floor suite of the lucrative private investment firm, Dorchester Capital, Clayton I. Bennett founded in 1990.

Out of these stately offices, tastefully appointed with museum-lit landscapes and bronze maquettes, sports memorabilia and family photos, Bennett, a soft-spoken, modest businessman and devoted husband and father, has his hands full working to make a success of the NBA's newest franchise while keeping his myriad professional and personal interests operating smoothly.

Bennett's to-do list has long been filled with high-profile projects, but at the moment, none is more ready for prime time than the NBA Thunder.

It's in Clay Bennett's self-effacing nature to deflect much of the credit for bringing

the team to Oklahoma, which may well go down in history as one of the state's defining achievements. Truth is, it couldn't have happened without him.

**T**HIS NBA in Oklahoma City story starts with what Bennett calls "a classic middle-class American family growing up in the sixties" in northwest Oklahoma City.

Bennett, forty-nine, was Ike and Sherry Bennett's firstborn. By the time the couple turned twenty-four, they had three boys.

"I kind of feel like we all grew up together," Sherry says.

Bennett's parents remember the high jinks common to a young family.

"It's a wonder they didn't kill each other," Ike says.

"They'd gang up on the sitters," Sherry says. "We ran a few of those off."

As a teenager, Bennett worked summers for his grandfather and father's family business, Public Supply, which manufactures and sells residential building materials. He did the toughest jobs, working in the warehouse and loading and driving trucks.

"He found out from a very early age that you had to work hard," Ike says.

Everyone who knows Clay Bennett would agree that he learned the work ethic lesson well. But at Public Supply, he learned an equally important lesson in corporate leadership.

"I came away observing what an important responsibility running a company is," he says. "So many lives and families depend on your diligence and your good judgment and ultimately to provide financial security for their families. I'm not sure how good a job I've done in that regard, but I appreciated the concept."

One of the responsibilities Bennett



**HE'S A PRO**

Well known as chairman of the Oklahoma City Thunder, Clayton I. Bennett has enjoyed success as the president of Dorchester Capital and in his many civic endeavors, including the Oklahoma State Fair and the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. Bennett, *Oklahoma Today's* 2008 Oklahoman of the Year, was photographed here in his office on November 25, 2008.



Bennett wields the telephone at age four.



Bennett married Thelma Louise Gaylord on December 30, 1981, at the Chapel of St. Edward the Confessor on the campus of Casady School. They have three children.



Bennett's senior portrait from 1978



Bennett, sports consultant Chuck Neinas, and Barry Switzer at the College Football Hall of Fame annual banquet held at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City

takes most seriously is caring for his family. His wife, Louise, is the youngest daughter of E.L. and Thelma Gaylord, Oklahoma's first family of media and entertainment and perhaps the closest thing the state has to blue-blooded royalty.

"To many people's surprise, the whole issue of her family's prominence has never been that significant because not only is she so down to earth, but so were her mom and dad and her siblings," Bennett says.

**Talking to Bennett about his WIFE AND KIDS is a little like watching a caterpillar morph into a BUTTERFLY. This dignified, slightly guarded pillar of the community becomes a MAN with REAL FEELINGS who isn't afraid to use them.**

Bennett first spotted Louise Gaylord in a Spanish class at Casady, the private school where he and his siblings and Gaylord and hers—and, incidentally, virtually all of the next generation of Bennetts and Gaylords—attended school. He was a fifteen-year-old sophomore, she a freshman.

"I didn't know who she was," he says. "We sat down that first day, and I thought, 'Wow, that is the most beautiful, cool, exciting girl I've ever laid eyes on.' I went around secretly admiring her."

A few months later, a mutual friend brokered a date for Clay and Louise to attend Casady's winter dance, and Clay, anxious, arrived an hour and a half early on Louise's street, parked his mother's car three blocks away, and waited.

The two dated throughout high school and remained connected while both went off to college, Clay to OU, then Binghamton University in upstate New York, and back to OU; Louise to OSU and then Mary Baldwin College in Virginia.

Thelma Louise Gaylord and Clayton Ike Bennett were married in December 1981 and today have three children, twenty-four-year-old Mollie, twenty-one-year-old Christy, and Graham, who at nearly sixteen is, his dad says, "at least six-six," able to dunk a basketball, and obsessed with the NBA.

After two difficult years wrangling with Seattle about the future of the Sonics' franchise—a period that included threats ugly enough to warrant bodyguards—his family's comfort and security have become, he says, "increasingly and intensely more the focus."

"Family is first for him," says Shannon Nance, president of the Oklahoma Heritage Association, a favorite Bennett institution and recipient of his civic involvement and philanthropic largesse. "That is an action, not something that sounds good on paper."

The Bennetts live a short walk from many other Bennetts and Gaylords and less than a block from the house in which Louise Bennett grew up. The low-key family enjoys the company of several pets—among them, a parrot; a sixteen-year-old cat; a golden



Fans celebrate at the opening game of the Thunder on October 29.

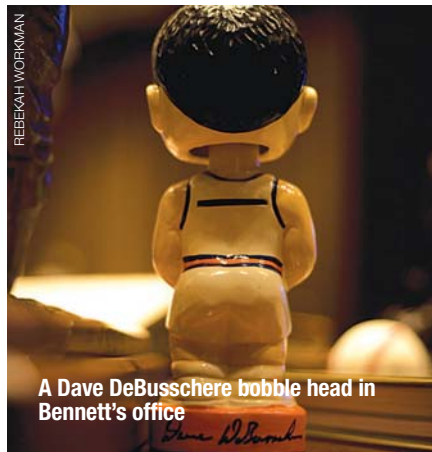
retriever ("but not a fancy one," Bennett says); a miniature Yorkshire terrier, Norman, whom Bennett calls "chairman of the board"; and a mutt named Winnie—and treasures getaways to their small log cabin in Basalt, Colorado, near Aspen. Also in Basalt is Town Center Booksellers, a cozy bookstore for devoted readers that Clay and Louise own. (Both are readers, though Clay admits that his frantic schedule has birthed a stack of unread books twenty deep.)

Talking to Bennett about his wife and kids is a little like watching a caterpillar morph into a butterfly. This dignified, slightly guarded pillar of the community becomes a man with real feelings who isn't afraid to use them. Conversations about Louise almost inevitably start with raw emotion, up to and including tears ("She's everything to me," he says, choking them back).

Bennett's emotional availability traverses the spectrum, and it's easy to understand why friends and associates routinely speak of him as fun loving. His smiles are frequent and accompanied by laughter, often at his own expense.

On October 30, Casady gave him its Distinguished Graduate Award.

"Kind of nice for a guy who barely made it through," says Bennett, who admits he was "a goof-off" in school. "I told them three parties



A Dave DeBusschere bobble head in Bennett's office

## Clay's Favorite Fair

*He's been chairman of the board for eleven years, but for Clay Bennett, the Oklahoma State Fair is more than a civic duty.*



Clay Bennett has a soft spot for a handful of Oklahoma City institutions, Casady School, the Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and Greater Oklahoma City Chamber among them. But in his

mind, there's something more than special about the **OKLAHOMA STATE FAIR**.

Bennett's leadership was instrumental in passing a taxpayer vote that funded \$55 million in improvements to State Fair Park in 2005. That can't hold a corn dog to the

experience itself for Bennett.

"I love the state fair," he says. "To this day, when I smell the smells, hear the sounds, and see the sights, it's almost as if I'm transported in time. It's about the people of Oklahoma, who we are, where we are, how we are."



Clay Bennett in the lobby of his Dorchester Capital offices in Oklahoma City

were shocked and dismayed when the award was made known. One was the headmaster at the time, the second was me, and the third was the members of the Class of 1978.”

**M**OST PEOPLE who know him point to a single formative incident that hewed Clay Bennett’s future as an NBA owner, the U.S. Olympic Festival in 1989. There, what Bennett learned gave him a taste of what sports administration was all about.

Ninety-one-year-old Paul Strasbaugh is general manager of the Oklahoma Industries Authority. In 1986, when he first encountered Clay Bennett, Strasbaugh, retired after thirty-six years at the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, was looking to hire an executive director to coordinate the complex, multivenue U.S. Olympic Festival to be held in the Oklahoma City metro area in July 1989.

Strasbaugh and festival planners, impressed with Bennett’s letter of interest, hired him. Under Bennett’s leadership, the festival blew

past revenue and attendance records.

“It was the most successful Olympic Festival ever held,” Strasbaugh says. “It still is the largest athletic event ever held in Oklahoma.”

At the time, Lee Allan Smith of OK Events was president of Oklahoma Centennial Sports, the local organizing arm of the U.S. Olympic Festival. He, like Strasbaugh, saw something in Clay Bennett.

“I detected a very intelligent and focused young man,” Smith says. “He’s the old triple C: calm, cool, and collected.”



JOHN JERNIGAN

**“I DETECTED a very INTELLIGENT and FOCUSED YOUNG MAN,” says Lee Allan Smith of Bennett. “He’s the old triple C: CALM, COOL, AND COLLECTED.”**

**G**OING FROM a large-scale amateur sporting event to a major-league franchise was an odyssey that started with ice dreams, gained speed with a hurricane, and eventually became hometown Thunder. The man in the eye of all three storms was Clay Bennett.

Few are aware that Bennett was one of then-Oklahoma City mayor Ron Norick’s original advisors for the MAPS civic improvement initiative in 1992.

“People respect Clay,” says Norick. “When Clay is involved, things are going to happen. He has the connections and the skills.”

Bennett’s influence was key in enlisting the support of his powerful father-in-law, his father-in-law’s newspaper, and the chamber of commerce for MAPS early on. His business savvy, credibility, and steady leadership at the helm of OPUBCO’s real estate subsidiary (where he headed up development of Gaillardia, the residential neighborhood started by OPUBCO) impressed Norick, who tapped the thirty-five-year-old as president of the Oklahoma Sports Commission, a group Norick organized in 1995 to court the National Hockey League.

That effort was ultimately unsuccessful, but big-league dreams did not die with the hope of obtaining an NHL franchise.

“We had to go through the process,” Norick says. “You don’t always win the first time you do something.”

Then, few would imagine how good losing out on the NHL would feel when the NBA came calling—more specifically, when commissioner David Stern called on September 3, 2005, five days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. A full 80 percent of New Orleans was under water, the preseason was imminent, and the New Orleans Hornets were without a home court.

Inside the stadium named after Bennett’s in-laws, the National Anthem was playing prior to the kickoff of the OU-TCU game. Bennett was in his family’s private suite on the fifty yard line when his cell phone rang. Stern, who had known Bennett since his days as a representative on the NBA Board of Governors when OPUBCO owned a portion of the San Antonio Spurs in the mid-1990s, told Bennett to find a quiet place to take the call.

Bennett hustled out of the suite and happened upon a janitor’s closet.

“It had the sink and a rack of cleaning supplies and a bucket with a mop,” he says. “That’s where, for the most part, we negotiated the \$40 million revenue guarantee for the Hornets’ temporary relocation.” Within days, Bennett had raised the full amount of the guarantee from friends, associates, and corporate underwriting.

The Hornets had two successful seasons in Oklahoma City; Bennett and a handful of other investors attempted, to no avail, to buy a minority stake in the team. Eventually, owner George Shinn returned the Hornets to New Orleans.

Experience is a time-honored teacher, and this step into NBA territory proved instructive. Bennett and a larger group of investors dubbed

Professional Basketball Club bought the Seattle SuperSonics franchise from Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's ownership group for \$350 million in July 2006.

That's when the tribulations began. After fifteen months of arduous, unsuccessful efforts to secure a deal to build a new publicly funded facility to replace the aging KeyArena, Bennett, chairman of PBC, announced in November 2007 that the team would seek to move to Oklahoma City. The franchise relocation fee? An additional \$30 million.

One Friday in September 2007, PBC filed for arbitration to clarify its rights and obligations under the KeyArena lease; the following Monday, the City of Seattle filed suit to keep the team in town until the lease was up in 2010. Shortly before U.S. District Court Judge Marsha J. Pechman was scheduled to announce her verdict on July 2, 2008, the case was settled, and PBC agreed to pay Seattle \$45 million to terminate the lease. Armed with an earlier 28-2 vote in favor of the move by the NBA Board of Governors, Bennett, et al., had a one-way ticket to move the franchise to Oklahoma City.

Finally, it appeared Oklahoma City would have a team to call its own, but that accomplishment was not without enormous financial

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cost to Clay Bennett and his investors (Bennett declines to name the total figure but refers to it as "huge"). In addition, Bennett and the staff of the team formerly known as the Sonics (the forty-year-old franchise's name remained in Seattle as part of the settlement agreement, but the statistics are shared) were now responsible for permanently relocating an NBA franchise and preparing facilities for its arrival in a compressed time frame of just less than three months.

Bennett, who made more than thirty flights to Seattle in two years ("Those last trips, getting on that airplane here in Oklahoma City, I almost had to be pushed in," he says), took a beating in Seattle. The city's media and residents distrusted his intentions from the outset and scapegoated him for their loss, despite their continued refusal to fund a new



arena, a stalemate that predated Bennett's arrival and was the reason why Schultz's group sold the team to PBC in the first place.

For a man whose integrity and character are legendary on his home turf, the battle with Seattle was a devastating surprise, one Bennett admits reflected a certain naiveté on his part.

"I wasn't prepared for the visibility and scrutiny and mean-spirited attacks," he says. "I've had moments when I've felt pretty jaded and cynical, and that's not my nature. I've struggled to get through that and readjust."

Thanks to the enormously successful temporary relocation of the Hornets, David Stern had become a big fan of Bennett and of Oklahoma City.

"We are delighted with the succession of events in Oklahoma City," Stern says. "This is the shortest turnaround time in the history of a launch of a franchise. I

feel confident about the good hands that the team is in because they're in Clay's hands and in the hands of his investor group. Clay, in addition to all of his connections, contacts, and willingness to work so hard, brings a keen business eye to a sports franchise."

**T**HE TEAM'S transition from SuperSonics to Thunder, from Seattle to Oklahoma City, was a gut check for staff members on both the business and basketball operations sides of the ball. Of the franchise's ninety-three business-side employees, nearly one-third opted to trade cosmopolitan coastal mist for prairie and blue sky. Many who planned to help out temporarily during the transition have ended up staying permanently, says the Thunder's chief administrative officer, Danny Barth.

## Anatomy of a Deal

### *The Oklahoma City Thunder Ownership Group*

As chairman of **PROFESSIONAL BASKETBALL CLUB**, Clay Bennett reluctantly gets most of the attention. His high-profile role doesn't change the fact that seven Oklahoma City businessmen, some friends of Bennett's since high school, have also invested millions in the Thunder franchise.

"This journey has been extraordinarily difficult, very high profile, very expensive, and many times nothing short of ugly," Bennett says. "As the managing partner, I made a lot of decisions on their behalf. I can never thank them enough for their support of me through it all. They're as important as any piece of this. Were it not for them, we wouldn't be here."

In addition to Clay Bennett, the Oklahoma City Thunder's ownership group consists of Tom L. Ward, CEO of SandRidge Energy; G. Jeffrey Records Jr., chairman of MidFirst Bank; William M. Cameron, CEO of American Fidelity Assurance; Robert E. Howard II, chairman of Howard Investments; Everett R. Dobson, managing partner of Dobson Partnership; Domer (Jay) Scaramucci, president of Balon Corporation; and Aubrey K. McClendon, CEO of Chesapeake Energy (not pictured).

REBEKAH WORKMAN



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS



The Oklahoma City Thunder ownership group, photographed on November 25 for the first time together, is a collection of old friends and new acquaintances. From left to right, Jeff Records, Tom Ward, Clay Bennett, Everett Dobson, Bill Cameron, Bob Howard, and Jay Scaramucci.



JOHN JERNICAN

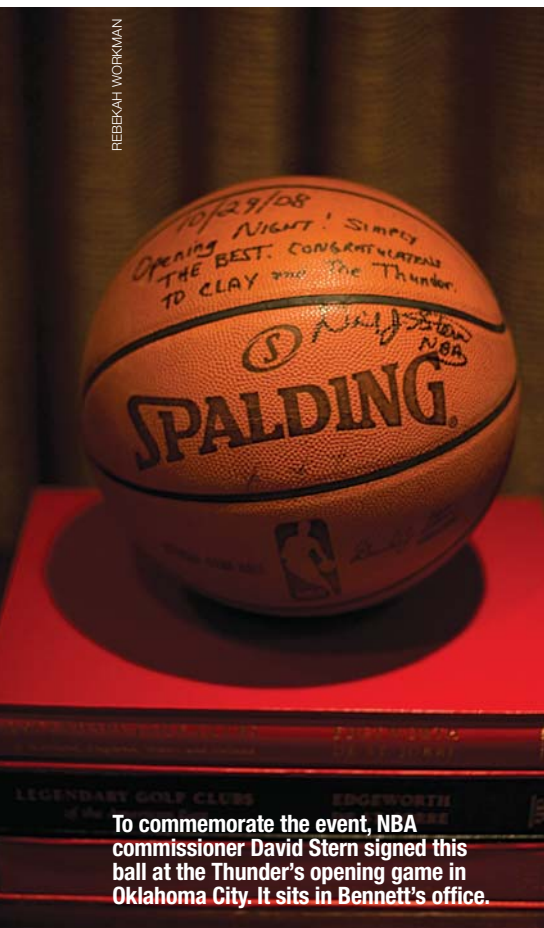


A few favorite items from Bennett's office





JOHN JERNIGAN



REBEKAH WORKMAN

To commemorate the event, NBA commissioner David Stern signed this ball at the Thunder's opening game in Oklahoma City. It sits in Bennett's office.



REBEKAH WORKMAN

Thunder shareholders Jay Scaramucci, Jeff Records, and Bob Howard at the Ford Center on November 25

Barth, a lifelong resident of the Seattle area who has been with the then-Sonics, now Thunder for eleven seasons, made the move, and he credits Bennett for solidifying his decision.

"I'm not sure I would have done it had I not had the relationship and the interaction with Clay early on," he says. "Through all the tough times—and I know how tough they were—he always was there for our staff, and that goes for the people who didn't move as well."

**It's hard for a man of Bennett's IMPOSING PHYSICAL STATURE—six-foot-five—and standing in the COMMUNITY to skirt the BRIGHT LIGHTS of the NBA's GLOBAL media platform, but it won't be for lack of TRYING.**

Sam Presti, general manager of the Thunder's basketball operations, is the man Bennett hired away from the front office of the NBA powerhouse San Antonio Spurs in June 2007.

"I was in a very, very good situation in San Antonio," says Presti. "It was not easy to leave. The more I got to know Clay and the more I spent time with him, the more I felt like this was the right thing for me."

Bennett considers Presti, a thirty-two-year-old wunderkind and Rhodes Scholar candidate credited with having one of the sharpest minds in the NBA, the key figure in the future of the Thunder organization.

"We trust him and support him and believe first and foremost he's the right individual from an integrity and personal character standpoint," Bennett says. "We share common objectives of how to do things, about doing them the right way. The basketball will come."

Sam Presti is a high-energy guy by nature, but his respect for his boss gives him an extra jolt of motivation.

"Being around someone who believes so strongly in the essence of community, philanthropy, and doing things the right way is inspiring and makes you want to work so much harder for him," says Presti, who graduated from Emerson College in Boston. "You know his motivation is not just for the good of the business but for the good of the community and all the people who surround the business and keep it functioning."

The scope of what it means to have the NBA here is not lost on Oklahoma's governor, Brad Henry.

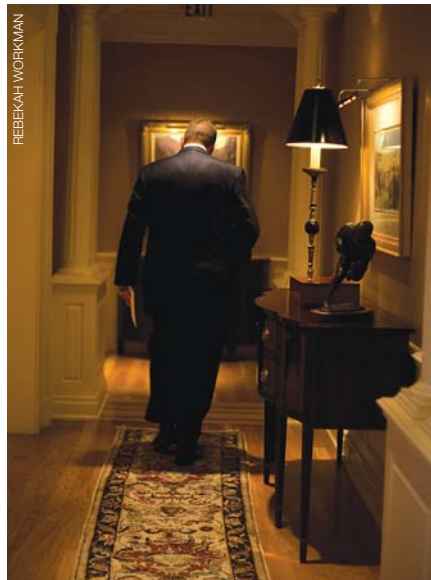
"An NBA franchise is an obvious economic boom, but just as important is what it does for the momentum and morale of Oklahoma," he says. "Clay Bennett had the resourcefulness, tenacity, and acumen to make that dream a reality."

**O**KLAHOMA CITY'S city manager, Jim Couch, has worked with Clay Bennett since 1988, most recently on the complex lease negotiations between the Thunder and the city and on taxpayer-funded improvements to the Ford Center and construction of a permanent NBA practice facility. Couch is also a Thunder season ticket-holder who sits in section 206 with his wife, Cathy, and his eighty-two-year-old mother, Virginia.

"We should all be for the Thunder," Couch says. "You're not wearing orange; you're not wearing crimson. It's something that will pull the community and the state together."

But don't think for a moment all the success and accomplishments in and outside the NBA have gone to Clay Bennett's close-cropped head. They haven't. It's hard for a man of his imposing physical stature—six-foot-five—and standing in the community to skirt the bright lights of the NBA's global media platform, but it won't be for lack of trying.

"I plan to be much less visible," Bennett says. "This needs to soon be about the players, coaches, and front-office personnel who are making this happen on a daily basis."



REBEKAH WORKMAN



**M**EANWHILE, THINGS are crazy inside the Ford Center. AC/DC lyrics blare, "We're doin' fine! Yeah, it's all right! We're doin' fine! So fine! Thunderstruck! Yeah yeah ye-ah!" as the players break from a time-out.

Despite being filled to the rafters with more than 18,500 screaming fans, the venue feels surprisingly intimate. It's easy to spot an Oklahoma City who's who of sorts scattered around the courtside seats among thousands of other boisterous fans, each of whom seems connected by an ineffable, shared bond.

During breaks in the action, thunder booms through the loudspeakers, and the crowd applauds impromptu stars of the Kiss Cam and Dance Cam, and most of all, the exuberant Thunder Girls, who attempt to dance the team to victory in the arena aisles, on the sidelines, and on the court between plays. It's a community party for young, old, and every age in between.

The Thunder is struggling, a coach has been replaced, and several games have ended heartbreakingly. Still, fans are only too happy to note that it's one of the youngest teams in the league in the midst of a relocation and rebuilding year the likes of which the NBA has never seen.

He'll tell you he had lots of help, but Clay Bennett was the one man on point to make it happen. As much as the famously reticent Bennett wants to divert attention away from himself, he roundly deserves every accolade—for loving his city and state enough to permanently usher them into the highest fraternity of sports and for putting himself, reluctantly but with a characteristic keen eye on quality and process, in the eye of a Thunder storm.

More importantly, Bennett has made his team Oklahoma's team, blue, yellow, and red-orange a new color combination to embrace. In Oklahoma, that's an achievement. 🐾