

CONLEY'S CORNER WITH TIMBERWOLVES POINT GUARD MIKE CONLEY

## Call him small-market Mike

Conley reflects on career spent in Memphis, Salt Lake City and the Twin Cities



Timberwolves guard Mike Conley plays against the 76ers on Wednesday in Philadelphia. MATT SLOCUM — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BY JACE FREDERICK

[JFREDERICK@PIONEERPRESS.COM](mailto:JFREDERICK@PIONEERPRESS.COM)

Mike Conley chuckled at the idea that he's perhaps the only NBA player who could be traded to Minnesota and marvel at the variety of things to do around the Twin Cities.

But that's the reality when you spend the first 15½ years of your career in Memphis and Utah.

Frankly, the Twin Cities are a middle-level market, easily trumping the sizes of Salt Lake City and Memphis in population and, thus, available activities. Late-night restaurant

options are so few and far between in Utah that Conley said most Jazz players would stick around and simply eat in the team's player lounge area.

Minnesota is the first place Conley has played that also has other professional sports franchises.

"It's been great. We've had the most fun we've had in awhile, just really taking into consideration trying to do more things outside the house, go to sporting events, because they're there," he said. "A lot of times, I'd only have like college sporting events to go to or things like that, but they have other professional teams, have Vikings games, the Twins, the Wild. My kids are interested in a lot of these sports, too, so it's fun things to take them to and teams to root for.

"It's completely different kind of approach to what I'm doing after the game. After the game I might want to find a spot to eat that might be open or a lot of options. That's pretty cool to have that, when you haven't necessarily been exposed to the bigger-city field and the wide range of things."

It has the sound of someone from Sleepy Eye who visits the Twin Cities.

"I don't know that there's too many guys who've took the route I've taken as far as small-market teams and never having been able to be in a large city or one of those big ones," Conley said. "So, yeah, it's probably unique (perspective)."

Big markets — such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Boston — are often touted as the places you want to be, especially as a professional athlete. That's where you'll receive the most attention and get the most opportunity to experience all the luxuries that come with being a professional athlete.

The attention piece matters. If a role player has a strong defensive showing on a random night, it will be featured on ESPN the next day. Meanwhile, stars around the league in smaller markets are only occasionally mentioned in the national conversation.

For example, while Oklahoma City guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander is universally recognized as one of the NBA's premier players, he's probably talked about as much as Lakers reserve guard Austin Reaves.

And that matters in terms of recognition. Timberwolves guard Anthony Edwards has the charisma and firepower that would usually help ascend a player into the national spotlight. But he didn't even finish in the top 10 among Western Conference guards in fan voting for last year's All-Star game, as the likes of Reaves and Russell Westbrook received far more votes. Edwards finally reached the All-Star game a season ago by way of injury replacement.

Conley has experienced similar snubs. He has been one of the NBA's elite floor generals for more than a decade and has exactly one All-Star appearance to show for it.

"I probably would've made it a few times if I played somewhere else," Conley admitted. "Because that stuff, unfortunately, it does matter a lot when it comes to that part of our game."

He noted where he has played has had a negative impact on the amount of attention he has received. The same is also probably true for the lack of credit he's been given.

"You people don't really watch a lot of your games. Being in Memphis and Utah, we're so far away. You get to the smaller markets and people aren't familiar with who you are, how you play," Conley said. "When I was younger, you definitely got a little frustrated when you look at guys who are doing well on other teams, and you're doing just as well as they are, but you're not close to being viewed in the same light."

But Conley only used the slights as motivation.

"It kept me locked in on trying to, every night, just prove to whoever I'm playing against, that city, the bigger markets, who I am and what I can do when I get those opportunities," Conley said. "It definitely was a little bit frustrating. But I wouldn't trade it for the world. I think it kind of made me who I am today. I wouldn't trade that."

There are a lot of things he has loved about spending his career in small markets. It may not have always been good for his career, but he feels it worked best for who he is as a person.

"I don't care much for lights and all the cute stuff. I just go to work and do what I'm supposed to do," he said. "I think the best part about it, for me, has been it kept me in touch with who I am. Because of how my personality pertains to things, I'm more (aligned with) a blue-collar atmosphere and mentality, which is what I'm all about. It kept me away from a lot of distractions."

The benefits have only grown more profound as Conley got older and his family grew larger.

"You just want your family to be happy. Where your kids are happy and thriving is where you're happy," Conley said. "End of the day, that could be anywhere — small town, big city. But I'm not out actively saying I have to play in a big market because it's on my bucket list. It just is what it is, and I'm happy where I'm at."

The emergence of social media and the internet as a whole have shrunk the map. Teams and players are more accessible than ever before, no matter where you're located. Conley noted that has helped the league and enhanced the growth of small-market franchises.

"Where (now) you can keep guys a little bit longer in those smaller markets, as opposed to everybody rushing out to find the first ticket to LA or New York or something," he said.

That's not to say Conley has never wanted a taste of the major market experience. Growing up, he pictured himself playing for the Bulls, Knicks or Celtics.

"It was all those big-name teams. You never really thought about the rest of the league. I'm kind of the product of that environment," he said. "You only know what's pushed in front of you. And I was pushed a lot of the Lakers, Celtics and Bulls, so that's all we knew

growing up. I can imagine a lot of the kids nowadays probably have that same thing, just to a little less extent.”

And the thought of whether the grass is truly greener lingers. Does bigger mean better? Conley has wondered “more than a couple times throughout my career” what it would be like to live in New York City or Los Angeles. Even at 36 years old, the thought remains. There is always a chance, even if it’s slim, that possibility could become a reality in the waning years of his career, even if just for a season.

“It would be more of a personal, individual thing. A lot of my decisions are driven by my family, so it would be completely selfish for me to do that,” he said. “But if it was something that definitely made sense for me, the kids and for my wifey, and everybody is happy, I would definitely, in a heartbeat, take that stab and maybe take the subway to work one day. Just do something just off the wall, because I’ve never had any type of experience with big-city life.”

At the same time, he knows others haven’t gotten to experience small-market life, and all it has to offer for a player. Conley enjoys the more intimate connection formed between players and fans in smaller markets.

For instance, it didn’t take long at all for the Twin Cities to wrap its arms around the veteran point guard and snuggly embrace him as its own. In the blink of an eye, Conley went from a new acquisition to “Minnesota Mike.”

That, he noted, is special. And probably doesn’t take place in New York or Los Angeles.

“It’s a unique feeling, for sure. I haven’t played in big markets, but you may not feel that as much if you’re one of multiple teams in a city — or multiple NBA teams in a city, for that matter,” Conley said. “You get a personal feeling in terms of the love you get from the fans, the importance of every game to the fans. They live and die by your team, and they support you to the end. So it’s kind of a really intimate relationship that you carry when you have those small-market opportunities.”

That’s what’s taking place in Minneapolis at the moment. Yes, the Twin Cities are flush with sports teams, but it’s short on winners. The Timberwolves are filling the void in a big way at the moment, and the excitement level is palpable. Conley likens the current support level for the Timberwolves to what he experienced in Memphis when the Grizzlies started to win at a high level.

“You can kind of feel the energy in every game, every single opportunity that we had. You could tell the fans were cheering for you,” Conley said. “Walking down the streets, the fans would be cheering you, end to end, there’d be chants going on. It’s just like a whole different kind of feel and appreciation you have towards those moments, because you’re doing something special, and you can see how special it is for the people and impacting them in such a strong way.

“It’s super cool to feel that, honestly.”