

Embodied by selfless MVP Nikola Jokic, Denver Nuggets culture has become a real thing, and a big ... [+] reason NBA players like Michael Porter Jr. and Aaron Gordon are signing and staying with the team.

Denver Post via Getty Images

In the NBA, where big markets in glitzy coastal cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Miami have historically been the most powerful free agent magnets, conventional wisdom has long held that the “flyover country” Denver Nuggets are not perceived as a coveted destination by many of the league’s players.

After a years-long process of Denver carefully crafting a unique brand of its own “Nuggets culture,” however, that perception is changing, with concretely positive results to show for it.

Guided by president of basketball operations Tim Connelly and his front office as well as head coach Michael Malone and his coaching staff, and epitomized by the humble reigning MVP Nikola Jokic, the cultivation of this selfless, hard-working, and above all positive Nuggets culture is redefining Denver as a place NBA players genuinely want to play.

‘An Egoless Team’

Newly-acquired free agent forward Jeff Green, who last season played for the current title-favorite Brooklyn Nets and has been teammates with a host of superstars, reportedly drew interest over the offseason from any number of championship contenders.

When I asked Green in his media week availability why he had chosen Denver when he ostensibly could have had his pick of flashier destinations, he was quick to point to the qualities which have come to define Nuggets culture.

“From my perspective, this organization, the players that were here, it was an egoless team,” Green said. “They play hard, they play for each other. The environment is always good. The front office is good, the rep is good.”

Green went on to praise the atmosphere of professionalism and positivity within the Nuggets organization. “You want to alleviate all nonsense. You want to alleviate all negative energy when you come into a situation. And coming into this situation, I felt it was all positive, it was all good energy.”

“So it was a no-brainer for me to sign on that line and come here and be a part of it.”

It wasn't too long ago that the notion that signing with the Nuggets might be a "no-brainer" for a valued veteran free agent like Green would have seemed implausible. The first game-changing turning point for Denver was landing four-time All-Star Paul Millsap in 2017, in arguably the franchise's biggest free agent acquisition since Antonio McDyess in 1999, or (via sign-and-trade) Kenyon Martin in 2004.

At that time in the early years of the tenures of Connelly and Malone, their patient, deliberate orchestration of Denver's cultural makeover was truly starting to take root,

The Nuggets' Growing Need To Attract Free Agents

And though Connelly and his operations staff have primarily built this Nuggets team through the draft – a sound approach considering the team's historic difficulty in attracting free agents – the importance of creating appealing conditions for players like Jeff Green, who can be key contributors on title-contending rosters, has quickly elevated in importance.

Following [the recent five-year rookie extension of Michael Porter Jr.](#), the Nuggets now have three maximum contracts locked in long term, with a presumed supermax extension in the works for Nikola Jokic next year (he qualified for that more lucrative status by winning the MVP award), and Jamal Murray's max contract continuing through the 2024-25 season.

Additionally, Aaron Gordon, who [re-signed this offseason on a four-year, \\$92 million deal](#), adds another hefty long-term salary to Denver's books which is guaranteed through 2025-26.

This adds up to Denver soon becoming a luxury tax-paying team, which heightens what will be an increasing need in upcoming seasons to be able to attract quality players through free agency to fill out their roster around their star core, much as teams like the Nets and Los Angeles Lakers did this offseason.

For the Nuggets, whose team-building philosophy has always highly valued [continuity](#), this also highlights the importance of retaining their own free agents such as Gordon, who joined teammates Will Barton III, JaMychal Green and Austin Rivers in returning to Denver on new deals.

And when these players explain why they wanted to stick around, the team's culture emerges nearly universally as a theme.

"The culture, the coaching staff, the players," Gordon replied when asked why he wanted to return to the Nuggets. "The trust that Tim [Connelly] and Calvin [Booth, Nuggets vice president of basketball strategy and analytics] put in me, and really the management as well, and ownership, I mean they trusted me."

"They want me here, and I want to be here. It's just a great organization."

Rivers, who the Nuggets initially signed midway through last season in the wake of Jamal Murray's season-ending injury, shared similar sentiments when asked what it was about Denver that made

players want to come back.

“It’s a fun place to play basketball. We’ve got a lot of willing guys that like playing the right way,” he answered. “It’s always about the team, nobody is ever above that,” Rivers continued.

“Denver’s obviously a cool city.”

‘One Of The Most Selfless Superstars You’ll Ever Come Across’

Another consistent theme when asked about returning to the Nuggets? The impact of Nikola Jokic, who has grown from developing within Nuggets culture to both helping shape it and becoming its living embodiment.

“He makes the game so much easier for everyone around him,” JaMychal Green explained. “You know, he’s a humble guy. He’s unselfish, and he’s just a great guy overall.”

Tim Connelly, in his media day availability, took the “great guy” notion a step further.

“If you don’t like playing with Nikola and being around him, I think you’re gonna have a hard time enjoying life,” he explained with a chuckle. “The guy’s a fantastic person, and obviously as a player you saw what he’s able to accomplish, and he literally doesn’t care about numbers.”

Connelly added that Jokic “just cares about winning, about having fun. I think fun’s a word we use quite often in our organization. So when you get around a guy like that, it’s hard to think about playing elsewhere.”

When asked how big a part Jokic has played in shaping the Nuggets’ culture, Michael Malone elaborated on his growth in that regard.

“It’s a huge part of it,” Connelly said. “Three years ago, Nikola was not the embodiment of our culture. And I think once he figured out that he had to get in great shape, he had to lose weight, and kind of change his work ethic, that’s when it kind of clicked for him and us.”

“Nikola is the centerpiece of everything we do. He’s the MVP,” Malone continued. “When you have the best player in the league setting the tone on a daily basis, that is invaluable... He is a guy that is willing to embody that culture of being a work team, a team that trusts one another, and is truly selfless.”

Driving the point home, Malone added that Jokic is “one of the most selfless superstars you’ll ever come across.”

Jokic's selflessness and work ethic have manifested themselves in increasingly visible ways in recent years, from players across the roster talking about emulating his post-game workouts, to his historically prolific playmaking from the center position as Denver's primary ball distributor, to his continued rejection of social media and shunning of celebrity status.

And both his generous play that elevates the performance of nearly every teammate he shares the court with, and the fact that his ascent to one of the NBA's most impactful players has helped vault Denver into legitimate and perennial championship contention, dovetail with the larger fabric of Nuggets culture in ways that make the franchise a more tantalizing destination for players around the league than quite possibly at any point in Nuggets history.

While in the abstract the notion of a "Nuggets culture" may seem somewhat elusive in terms of its impact on actual basketball operations, it has now clearly solidified into a very real thing, and one which has not only transformed Denver into one of the league's healthiest, most thriving organizations (one needn't look long around the NBA to find multiple teams reeling from dysfunction), but is also by extension producing the tangible result of more – and better – players signing on the dotted line.

Source: [Embodied By MVP Nikola Jokic, 'Egoless' Denver Nuggets Culture Is Proving Its Value](#)