

## Over 150 fans flock to Pacers-Thunder Watch Party at Town Square to support Auroran Andrew Nembhard



There were many compelling reasons to enjoy the Pacers-Thunder Watch Party at Town Square on Friday the 13th.

- Free popcorn served cheerfully and faithfully for four quarters and during half-time by Town of Aurora rep Kaitlyn Zaragoza Ceren;
- A reasonably-priced, frosty Beswick Lagered Ale from Newmarket-based Market Brewery for a sawbuck: \$9.04 for the libation and a 96-cent tip given to the pleasant bartenders at the Café;
- ABC's broadcast beamed on to a vivid screen with sound so good one would think we were comfortably ensconced in Indy's Gainbridge Fieldhouse ? listening to the squeaky sneakers and thunderous dunks;
- A collective community experience for dozens of kids and their parents or siblings who enjoyed being in a big group and comported themselves so positively on a Friday night;
- Cheering vociferously for Aurora-born-and-raised Andrew Nembhard ? the starting shooting guard and emergent star for the Indiana Pacers.

The crowd of 150+ fans?seated comfortably in either the floor chairs provided by Town staff, in their own deck chairs, or in the bleacher seats on the south side of the amphitheatre?erupted when consecutive baskets by Pascal Siakim and Nembhard gave Indy an early 20-12 lead and compelled OKC to take a timeout.

This eight-point margin was much to the delight of the high-basketball-IQ fans gathered at Town Square, as was Nembhard's dynamic three-pointer.

The pro-Indy crowd cheered scores of any kind by the yellow-clad Pacers.

By contrast, response to the Thunder's baskets was comparatively muted ? even though OKC's starting lineup featured 2025 MVP Shea Gilgeous-Alexander and fellow Team Canada competitor Lu Dort.

The popcorn was tasty and the Market Brewery libation was refreshing under the strung lighting that conjured up memories of Kim Mitchell singing ?those patio lanterns?they were stars in the sky.? The stars on the 15-foot wide TV screen kept us engaged, especially the images of Nembhard's tenacious, court-length defense versus the talented Gilgeous-Alexander.

Chants of ?Defence!!? by the entire crowd showed folks' connectivity to the big screen and Indy closed out the high-scoring first quarter with a 34-33 lead. The Café did a booming business and folks plucked a bag of free, freshly-prepared popcorn from the display rack, courtesy of Kaitlyn and the Town of Aurora.

Spontaneous chants of "Let's Go, Pacers!" filled the amphitheatre for much of the second quarter and ABC broadcaster Richard Jefferson complimented the defensive prowess of Aurora's favourite NBA Star.

"With Nemhard, there is no intimidation for him in guarding the league MVP."

Jefferson and veteran broadcaster Doris Burke praised the efforts of the upstart Pacers, but OKC started to pull away in the second quarter much to the chagrin of those assembled.

However, Tyrese Haliburton's pair of circus shots in the final minute of play supercharged the audience at Town Square and restored the Pacers' lead to 60-57 at half-time.

Special Events Program Assistant Kaitlyn Zaragoza, who has worked for the Town for eight months, took a short break at half-time from her duties to discuss the recent use of the new amphitheatre.

"I really enjoy seeing the new space being used like this. It's very fulfilling and there's incredible energy here. Everyone is enjoying the free popcorn—it's become a favorite task. It's cool to see so many enjoying the game tonight. It's also satisfying to see this gathering space filled with sports fans supporting Andrew Nemhard. It's meant for Aurorans to enjoy."

Town of Aurora Sport and Community Development Representative Aiden Ament—who helped organize the event—has been on the job for seven months following the completion of his Sports Management degree. The recent graduate of Brock University described the best part of the Andrew Nemhard Watch Party: "It's the environment and atmosphere tonight. This is a tightly-knit basketball community. The kids are running around at half-time and the parents look relaxed. Everyone is out for a great time. Word of mouth—through the kids' social media, especially—has boosted attendance. The numbers have increased every game."

Chris and Owen Roche—who have been watching the Edmonton-Florida NHL Finals outdoors at Newmarket's Riverwalk Commons in support of Connor McDavid —travelled to Aurora to take in the NBA Watch Party.

12-year-old Owen, who plays basketball in the U13 YNBA division, was impressed by the number of basketball fans in Town Square

"Everybody's here. It's cool to see everybody here. It's great to see all these people watching basketball."

Owen's dad thought the best part of the evening revolved around the uniqueness of "Outdoor basketball viewing—it's a rarity and I've been an NBA fan all my life."

"It's really good basketball to watch and there's the free popcorn, too. Seeing so many Canadian players star in the NBA is also great to see, plus Siakim's playing so well for the Pacers, so that makes it even more awesome."

The final result at Town Square wasn't so awesome for fans of Andrew Nemhard and the Indiana Pacers. An historic performance by Alex Caruso—20 points and 5 steals off the bench—helped OKC to a 111-104 come-from-behind victory.

The 31-year-old Caruso was at his pesky best and SGA was majestic down the stretch as the Thunder overcame an 87-80 third-quarter deficit, outscored the Pacers 31-17 in the final twelve minutes, and evened the series at 2-2.

Perhaps Friday the 13th was a bit unlucky for Nemhard's Pacers who led OKC for most of Game 4. However, hope springs eternal for the ardent Town Square fans supporting the Indiana Pacers.

**By Jim Stewart**