

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Coach Mark Daigneault Press Conference



MARK DAIGNEAULT: I just want to start with some thank yous. I'd be remiss to not acknowledge some people. I just want to thank, first of all, our players, who I thought raised the bar with their professionalism this year. Those guys were outstanding. High, high character, hardworking, committed, consistent. All the things that we want to make sure that we continue and establish here, those guys embodied for the season. They're not perfect, and they're improving, but they certainly raised the bar as it relates to those things.

I want to thank all our player facing staff, people that are on the ground floor with our guys, from our coaching staff, medical and performance, operations, massage therapists, chefs, the testers that did our COVID testing all year, everybody that was in the day-to-day grind with the team for their consistency and craftsmanship.

I want to take the time to thank our front office, Mr. Bennett, all the people that are part of our Thunder family that weren't necessarily on the ground this year, especially because of COVID. We had a lot of really good employees doing really good work remotely who weren't able to plug into the day-to-day environment. We certainly missed having them, but it didn't stop them from making huge contributions to the team.

I want to thank our fans for their continued support in what was obviously a really, really crazy year. But we certainly felt the support and encouragement from our fans. I know our players did and fed off that. And we appreciate them for all their backing this season.

And then I want to thank you guys for your coverage and your interest this year, your engagement, and most of all just how prepared and fair you guys were. I appreciate that. It was great getting to know you guys, at least remotely. I look forward to a day where I can meet you face to face, but I just want to thank you guys for your work this season, as well.

I'm good with questions now.

Q. When you took over for Billy, were you prepared for any direction this team would take this season? Did you have any expectations going in at all?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I mean, not really in terms of expectations. One thing I've learned is not to make assumptions, not really to have expectations. That's the best way to be able to adapt to any circumstance.

But I also was aware of where the team was headed just because of the cycle that we were in and how transparent Sam was even publicly with that.

But there was no telling what kind of timetable anything would be on. I think with the NBA the way it is, it's important for organizations to be adaptive and to be opportunistic, and so I think that's something that doesn't necessarily have a timetable, and Sam is really measured and patient as it relates to that sort of thing.

I didn't have a direct expectation, nor do I moving forward. It's just about attacking the day and making sure that we're not skipping steps in terms of our quality, and that's what best positions us for anything moving forward.

Q. Obviously you've been a head coach before, but 72 games in 150 days or whatever it was, I was just curious if there was anything that maybe stood out to you as a favorite thing that you got to do day in, day out as you prepared for each one of these games in this role as the head coach of an NBA team, something that maybe became a special part of your routine?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I mean, the most special thing, to be honest with you, is just the people that I got to work with every day. Like I said in the beginning, I thought our players especially, but really everybody that was around our team this year, really raised the bar professionally and raised the bar in terms of craftsmanship.

It was pretty impressive because it was obviously a whacky year with all the circumstances that we've talked about all year -- Summer League, short off-season, no fall buildup, daily testing twice, all the uncertainties of the times. It was really as volatile a season as you could have probably drawn up, especially if you trace it back all the way to last year and the bubble and that sort of thing, and yet everybody here was so consistent with their approach, so



focused on their craft, so willing to pour into each other and into the environment.

That was the most enjoyable thing, and it really was a great lesson for me because it was the most volatile environment, at least in professional sports, that I've encountered and I'm sure a lot of people have encountered, and yet there was never a team that was more professional and consistent throughout all that.

So that was really the most enjoyable thing in the moment and as I reflect back on it.

Q. This is obviously very different for you. How did you maintain your energy level through all the struggles? You seemed pretty steady through all of this.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: You know, I hate to answer it the same way, but it's the people that you're around every day. I'm a big believer in this: You go home and you go to bed and you wake up in the morning, and some days are easier than others, some days are better than others, and there's some days where you like drag yourself to your car and drag yourself to work.

The first people I saw every day were our testers and their unbelievable spirits. They were ridiculously consistent. For our players, our players had to wait a half hour before they could enter the building after they tested, and most days our chefs would make them breakfast and bring it out to their cars. So the first person they're seeing is our chefs in the morning who are serving them.

The consistency and steadiness comes from the consistency and steadiness of the environment and the air that we get to tap into and breathe every day in our building.

So I fed off the energy of the other people, and it makes it easier to bring that energy to that environment, and on the day that you're down, you get picked up by it. On the day that you're up, you can lift the environment up, and that's true for everybody, and it certainly was true for me.

Q. I didn't even think about this and wasn't going to ask until you just told that story, but just describing the early morning arrival of the players and what they had to do, what everybody had to go through, but particularly the players, just to have a season, in some ways did it make it easier that you had a young team, a bunch of guys, many of whom had never played in the NBA before, that didn't know the good times or the easy times or however you want to refer to it? Did that make this easier, do you think, for the Thunder

because so many of these guys were just sort of glad to get a shot at the NBA and see what it's like? If somebody like me would have had to do that, I'd have been bitching about Game 2 and wouldn't have stopped. Did this make it easier, so many young guys going through this?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, first of all, if you brought that attitude here, we would flush that out right away. We'd get that addressed. Kenrich Williams would grab you by the shirt and get you in order. But I think it's not a young-old thing, like Muscala, Horford, like those guys, Kenrich Williams, those guys were right in line in terms of their approach, and a lot of our staff are people that have been around us for a long time.

I just thought the adversity of the season and the challenge of the season brought out the best in everybody, and it's a real character test, and I think the character of the people transcends age, transcends expectations, transcends anything like that. I thought it was more a byproduct of the character of the people we have top to bottom, especially on our roster, than it was the youth of the team.

I do think for guys, young guys, trying to prove themselves and trying to really get their footing in the NBA, to have to endure some of the things that they had to endure this year, it was really impressive how they were able to build their professional habits and strengthen their muscles in that way despite the challenges, and then like I said, for guys like Al and Muscala and Kenrich Williams and some of the older guys, I thought they set the tone, as well. They were as consistent as anybody, despite their experience.

Q. What is just your process going to be over the next few days, whether it's reflecting back on the season, evaluating players, projecting moving forward? What is your plan to sort of wrap this up?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, we're all taking time, and we're encouraging our players to take time. I mean, one thing that I think you really have to prioritize right when the season ends is just unplugging and allowing yourself to come down a little bit.

I think everybody when a season ends, no matter what the circumstances are, you're a little punch drunk, and you have to kind of get yourself back to zero before you can think clearly about the year. But we'll take a few weeks here, and then we'll come back and we'll reflect on the year. We have a bunch of meetings that are not only within the coaching staff but meetings with the players. We call them engagement meetings, and meetings in an integrated way where we're meeting with the other people in the organization and really try to draw the lessons out of



the season that we can carry forward before we plow forward into the off-season.

It starts with reflection, then we come back and kind of get our heads together and make sense of the season, things we did well, things we need to improve, and then get a plan in place to improve those things, and most importantly our players will start to trickle back into the market, and it's a huge off-season for us.

There's obviously a lot of work to be done, and we're not going to skip steps. We're going to prioritize quality in that, and it requires day-to-day focus, whether it's in the season or in the off-season. That's the initial process.

Q. How do you handle just the roster uncertainty moving forward, not knowing -- I know you've got a better idea than we do, but not knowing for sure who's going to be back and what the team is even going to look like and where to put that focus?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, in the off-season I think it's really important to just prioritize the individual developmental plans of the players that are on the roster. I've talked many times about there's obviously a lot of uncertainty in the NBA. You can't predict the future. And so the solution to that is to just be incredibly present with the players that are on the roster and in front of you at the given moment.

They feel that when you do that. It's important for them, as well. They don't know where they're going to be a year from now necessarily. And you're encouraging them to do the same thing. You've got to be where your feet are, and you've got to be fully in the moment that you're in. That's the only way that you're going to maximize that moment, and ultimately it's the only way you're going to put yourself in position to accomplish longer term goals, whether you're a player or an organization, so that's what we're going to do.

Q. This is a pretty big year for Shai in his development. He became a much better player than he was in his first two seasons. I wonder if you'd walk me through what you saw from the start of training camp, really through the time that he stopped playing and kind of the progressions that you saw, maybe just holistically what you saw from him as a player. I don't know if you could even project a little bit as to what you see for him moving forward.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, what I project for him moving forward is kind of related to that answer, which is the most impressive thing about him, especially with the off-season upon us, is every time you give that guy time in the

off-season, he comes back better, and he's proven that time and time again. From his first year with the Clippers to his first year with us, he was a completely different play. Even from the end of the shutdown to the beginning of the bubble, he kind of changed his body a little bit during that time and was stronger and better.

And then certainly from the end of last season to the beginning of this season, even with a short off-season, like he maximizes his time and is a real worker, and it shows up in all parts of his game and with his body. You can't fake that. That's encouraging for a guy that's 22 and has a lot of runway ahead of him.

And then on the court, really impressive efficiency as a player. The league is trending towards efficiency, and ultimately on both ends of the floor, that's what you're after is how efficient can you be on offense and defense, and as a primary creator, as a point guard, he not only generates efficient shots for himself, shoots them efficiently, gets to the free-throw line, but he lives in the paint and generates efficient shots for the rest of the team.

If you look around the league at the guys that are real impact players, that's a mark of an impact player, and he certainly has himself on that track. Now it's a matter for him of getting healthy. That's step one right now, and getting himself back to 100 and then hitting the summer hard.

But I have no doubt in my mind when he walks back through the doors next year, he's going to look different again and he's going to look better again because that's a skill and he's proven that it's something that he's figured out how to do.

Q. On his three-point shot just in general, only 30 percent of his three-point shots were off the catch, which is -- it was a lot more last season. I just wonder if you know of anything specific that he did besides just -- obviously he worked hard, but is there anything specific that he did to get better?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, I think if you look at his form from his first year until now, he's definitely changed his shot. And then I think he definitely has worked on the skills that the elite point guards have, which is to be able to shoot the ball off the dribble and to be able to shoot the ball off a pick-and-roll, shoot threes specifically off pick-and-roll. If you look at the guys that are hardest to guard as primary creators it's the guys that you have to go out and play.

Looking at his game coming into the year, I think what you're thinking, at least if I were preparing to go against him coming into this year, I'd be saying, okay, you've got to

try to get under on him and as many pick-and-rolls as you can, and then if you can switch him, switch him and gap him and sell out on getting him out of the paint because he's just so elite at getting in there. Even when you do that, he still gets there.

But his ability to make threes off of pick-and-rolls and then when he's iso'd or if they switch on to him and they try to guard him that way, if you gap him and you let him tee up pretty uncontested threes off the dribble, he's going to make you pay. I think he was like 1.3 on some of those shots from an efficiency standpoint, which is a really good number. Now you're in a real dilemma. You're dealing with a guy that can make threes off the dribble. You're dealing with a guy that lives in the paint, gets fouled, sprays out for efficient shots for his teammates. Now you get into the territory of having to double him, and now you're having to get into a rotation, and those are the hardest teams to guard.

He's really improved his three-point shooting in those two areas, and he hasn't dropped off in terms of his catch-and-shoots.

Q. Talking about Shai, no matter where anybody wants to say the progression or the rebuild of the Thunder is, does his accelerated development speed up the Thunder rebuild just because he is so good?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, I'd say that the progression of the team is going to happen at the pace that it does. The number one priority for us is not to skip steps and to focus on the quality of the work along the way, not to focus as much on a timeline, but to focus on the quality of this step right now, because, again, you can't predict the future. You can't predict when your opportunities are going to come up. You can't predict when you can strike. And we have the best in the business in terms of our front office and their ability to navigate those things.

But we have a guy that clearly is on track to be a great player, if he isn't already, and so that certainly is encouraging.

But at the end of the day, it doesn't speed up our timeline. Our timeline is going to be a byproduct of our opportunities, and we're not going to press fast forward on that. We're going to be extremely present with where we are and with the players that we have and just put one foot in front of the other, and that's kind of the mentality that we've always taken and that we'll continue to take. It's certainly a necessity in this particular market.

Q. Another follow-up on Shai. What's sort of the plan for him as far as getting back healthy, and how much

of a concern is it knowing that he might be playing for the Canadian National Team and that's going to be a big load this summer for some of your guys who are going to do Olympics? How are you handling that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, I mean, Shai is a young guy, but he's a really smart guy and understands the big picture. That's another thing from the season. I think -- this is unrelated to your question, but just watching him grow as a game manager and somebody that's like running a team truly for the first time, his ability to like conceptualize that beyond what's right in front of him is pretty impressive for a young guy.

As it relates to his body and the injury that he has right now, I would say I would expect the same thing in talking to him. That's the case. He's going to prioritize getting healthy, so we're completely aligned on that. Everybody is on board with that. Everyone knows that that's number one for every player, especially for him coming out of the season. You never want to limp into training camp with the next season upon you. That's worst-case scenario, and he understands that.

As far as the national team, that will be his decision, and he'll make a decision on that pretty shortly because it starts up soon, but we're prioritizing his health, so is he. But also we support these guys in the off-season in whatever track they choose to go, and then we react from there.

Q. Obviously this was a unique situation with AI and you guys mutually agreeing that he was going to sit out. I know you talked about him a little bit last night, but how did you handle that as a first-year coach, and again, with the uncertainty of this off-season and him being a likely trade candidate, how do you handle that situation moving forward?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I mean, AI is on the team, and AI is on our roster. I think our staff has done a great job with him during this period of time at keeping him sharp and ready and having a plan for him and being with him in that plan in the way that we can support it.

You know, look, everything from this year, at the end of the day, it was easy because of the guys, like everything was easier. It wasn't easy, it was challenging, obviously, all the way around, but everything was a little bit easier because of the guys we get to work with, and there's no better example of that than AI.

I'm so grateful that the first like true veteran, former All-Star, current All-Star caliber player that I get to coach as a head coach is AI Horford. He makes you a better coach. He makes his teammates better players. That's



the mark of him as why he's a great player. It's how he enhances the environment and the group, and I was a recipient of that.

We're going to continue -- he's under our umbrella right now, and we're going to be present with him in the off-season just like we are with the rest of the group.

Q. As you were talking about all of the COVID stuff this year, obviously all of those requirements for players, then the rapid fire nature of the second half of the season with games, and this was a tough year for any team, and then for you guys with the losses, I'm wondering if there was any point through that, especially the second half of the year, where you felt like, man, today might be the day that guys -- maybe it's a struggle or maybe we're starting to see some of that. Was there a point that maybe the guys surprised you, or was there a guy or two along the way that really kind of helped keep you guys moving forward even when things were really tough?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Like I said, it's in the air, and it's a byproduct of having great people top to bottom, players, staff. And yeah, I mean, in a competitive environment, there's always going to be a day where an individual person has a bad day, myself included, where the person is just a little bit off.

But that's why you bet so heavily on the environment, and that's why you lean on that, because when an individual person has that day or has that moment, a strong environment and a strong culture can lift that person up and plug that person back into what we're doing, and I thought there were numerous examples this season of challenges, and there were numerous examples of moments at the beginning of the season, end of the season, all the way through, where people were a little bit off or people were a little out of character. That's just part of being human, and it's part of going through competition.

We weren't perfect, but the mark of this team is we plug back in and it was because of the environment that we had, and when somebody was down, the group lifted them back up, and everybody felt that. There was a tremendous humility to that, and it was impressive to be a part of.

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