

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Tuesday, June 22, 2021

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Sam Presti

Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: Well, just want to say good evening to everybody. Excited that you can be with us tonight.

Obviously tonight is a unique moment for the NBA. There's only a few nights in the NBA year that really have like a tremendous influence on not just the following season but for many, many seasons. This is one of them.

I just want to say, I'm really appreciative of all the excitement that our fans and community have shown about the night, and I think it's great. I think people should enjoy it and enjoy the experience of it. I also we also need to remember that this is all random. It's like rolling dice. But irrespective of what happens, we have to remember that the rule of luck and the rule of chance is not a singular thing.

As I say, luck favors the persistent, so if we continue to put ourselves in position to make good decisions and think long-term about the best interest of the franchises, we're going to have some good fortune. Hopefully it's this evening but it's out of our hands. It's like scratching off a lottery ticket in the parking lot of a convenience store only with Mark Tatum announcing it and millions of people watching you scratch the lottery ticket off.

As I said, we don't control it, but what we do control is how we respond and how we react, which I think we'll do a great job of. We have a lot of things to work with at the draft and also in the future, and my hope is that we'll continue to make strong, sound decisions, like I said earlier.

The other thing I think that is important to note is if we do have some success, we have to recognize that it's the result of randomness, as well, and if things don't go our way, as I said before, it's the result of randomness.

But to be in this position is a great, exciting thing. There's one thing that I've learned over my time in the NBA since the year 2000, is that luck really presents itself on a given day, but skill is something that shows up over the course of time. In between these moments where you get



distributions of good or bad fortune, as I said before, if you stick to your principles, you stick to your values, you think in the best interest of the organization long-term, and in our case we're really focused on building a sustainably great team in Oklahoma City, I think good things will happen.

I think we should be optimistic about that and continue to be forward-facing with that respect.

Personally, what I'm really looking forward to is just getting the order, get of kind of what the lineup card would look like, because as soon as we get there, it really puts us in position to start thinking and being creative and having conversations with other teams, having conversations with agents, obviously the workout process continues, but I'd rather have the clarity than anything.

That's the thing I'm most excited about. I'm not really much more the suspense or made-for-TV drama or moment, but just getting to know by the end of the night to know where we're going to be picking, that's a huge thing for us. I'm really looking forward to that.

I think, again, just to our fans, I want them to share this experience with other people. Hopefully it's a real positive one. It might not be a positive one, depending on how the coin gets flipped, but it's still a great experience as a Thunder fan to be in the moment and have fun and understand that we're going to be picking somewhere in the top 10 with an opportunity to layer another really good young player and a couple more during the draft, as well, to the core guys that we're working with and developing.

Couldn't be more excited about the evening and what the future holds for us as an organization as long as we continue to keep our eye on the ball and don't skip any steps, which I'm very confident will be the case.

I'm happy to take a few questions and handle anything that you guys want to talk about.

Q. Tonight, whatever happens, whether it's what we consider good or what we consider bad, does that change anything that you're doing immediately? Or is the process the same for you tonight, tomorrow, the next week? Is the process the same, you've just got more advantageous slots to work with?



SAM PRESTI: Well, I think it changes a little bit because the access, depending on where you're drafting, the access to the players changes; you know what I mean? It's really hard for us right now, like we don't have a lot of things scheduled because agents are generally waiting to find out where everybody is picking, and things don't usually take off until after the combine anyway. Logistically and planning-wise, I think the position will matter a little bit, but we're so distributed throughout the draft that we're going to have a look at a lot of different players just because of where we're picking in the second, where we're picking in the first. We're covering a lot of territory that way.

Back to what I was saying earlier, which is nothing really changes for us other than gaining clarity tonight. We still have a ton of work to do. All we're doing is now kind of honing in on a little bit more strategy, understanding what might be realistic and what's not, and that's really valuable. That's why I said before, I'm not really for -- I don't really care about the TV aspect or the suspense of the whole thing. I understand why it's a great thing to put on TV; people love it.

For me, I just want to know where the slots are. That's all I care about. I don't mean to sound like dispassionate about it, but we have zero control over it. I don't think it's something you can put a ton of energy into hypothesizing about until you get to this point, and now we're going to get that clarity so we can really kind of take the next step.

I don't think it's really changed the process a ton other than access to some of the players depending on where you're ultimately selecting.

Q. I was just wondering about Kemba Walker and whether he was a guy you viewed from afar as just a player you admired, or had he been on your radar as a possible roster guy? I'm sure you have a list of guys who maybe potentially, whatever, so was he that kind of guy for you?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we track like all the players in the league because we have to do it. We make a running kind of analysis on everybody.

The one thing about him that is pretty unique, and when we did the trade obviously with Al, he's an extraordinarily like high-character, positive, professional, and we feel like with Kemba we're getting a very similar person. A little bit different personality but values-wise like very similar. And obviously a different position.

But I wouldn't say we were like -- we have a lot of people we're tracking, but once you start getting into those

conversations you have a better idea of what's available, you start thinking about it a little bit differently.

I haven't had the chance to -- he's been out of the country when all this happened, and we've been in Chicago, so I'm going to spend some time with him. I'm going to see his agent here and I'm going to spend some time with him next week and sit down and kind of get a better feel for him as a person, but everything that we know about him is extremely positive.

We'll have a better handle on kind of where he's at and give him a feel for us, but we just haven't had a chance to do that just yet. But we're excited to have him because it's hard to find guys that score and create shots in the NBA. That's really, really rare. It's also rare to find guys that almost every single person you speak to has the same impression of him on a day-to-day basis, which is super positive, also.

Q. What's your reaction to the Atlanta and Phoenix runs to the Final Four? Are you encouraged by any of it, or are you just --

SAM PRESTI: No, I mean, look --

Q. Watching it intently?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's great. I don't think we can say that it's -- parity is not something that shows up one year. That's not really parity. I think it would be awesome if we saw a diversity of conference finalists over a period of years, and then you could really say, okay, well, we have parity here.

But irrespective, I think it's a great example of a team seizing the moment. Both those teams have done great. Obviously I couldn't be happier for Chris. He's just a class act. We hope Monty, and Cam Payne is another guy. We like to see all the guys that have been here do well. That's how we come at things. Like we're not rooting against people.

I think for us it's always we want anyone who's been here and walked through the doors to do well unless we're playing against them, obviously, and I think it's good. I think it's great that there's some diversity. I think that's important for the future of the league.

Q. I just wanted to follow up on the trade. This isn't always a typical timeline for a deal of that magnitude to take place. Can you walk us through how it came together?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. I mean, the Celtics had some

interest in AI, and we've had a few different conversations. I think when Brad assumed the role of running the front office, it was just kind of a natural conversation that came up. It made, I think, a lot of sense for both teams. I think it's a great trade for the Celtics. I think it's a great trade for us. I think it's a pretty simple deal. I don't think it's super complicated.

The 16th pick in any draft is really, really hard to get a hold of, and getting a player like Walker, who like I said before, shot creation is like -- it's at a big premium, as you can tell in the Playoffs now.

It just made sense for us, and I think AI will do great there, and as I said before, AI has been just awesome for us. He's thrilled about being back in Boston, so I'm glad that it worked for everybody.

Q. If Kemba is on the roster going into next season, how do you see that potential fit with him in the backcourt with Shai, because there's so much talk of Shai leading the offense, always having the ball in his hands?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I don't think anything is going to change with Shai. I think good players -- I think you've seen this in the NBA. Good players learn to play together. We've had that situation here. We've played three guys together at different points in time.

That's not something that's really -- I don't think a big factor over 48 minutes in the way we play, which is pretty democratic in general, and the way that Mark really kind of sees the game. I think it will be actually -- it will be fine.

Q. I know there's no skill involved in the role tonight, but why is Nazr a good fit to be the representative?

SAM PRESTI: So one, I think Nazr is a great example for our organization just as the person that he is, the influence he's had. Obviously he's played on our teams, and he's also now working as a general manager of the Blue and does some pro scouting for us, as well, and I think he's got a bright future, so he fills a couple different roles. The league gave us our parameters and they were relatively narrow as to who you can have represent the team, and Nazr checked a couple -- I think they gave us four kind of tracks you could go down, and he fit the player track and the front office executive track, and we thought he'd do a great job with it.

I'm really excited for him. I think it's a great experience for him.

Q. You haven't been involved in this a lot in terms of

the lottery and things of that nature. Has it changed? I don't want to say you had to learn something because you would have been scouting anyway, but you also would have been involved with the Playoffs in normal times, either playing or just got done. Does that change anything about how you've had to go about your business with this off-season?

SAM PRESTI: Not really. I mean, I think the biggest change is the type of season we just were coming off of in general. It's at the end of the season -- it's a one of one. I hope we're in a position never to have to do anything like that again.

It has had an effect on just the ability to see players maybe at the same level that we've been able to see them in the past, but everybody has the same disadvantage, so I have no problem with that. I think you guys know me by now; I'm just about fairness. As long as everybody has got the same things to work with, I'm perfectly good with that.

But I don't think it's really changed a lot. I think the league is a lot different than it was when we were in this stage 12 years ago, 13 years ago, whenever it was. Things have changed drastically. The world has changed significantly, but the NBA is really changing landscape. It changes every couple years now.

I think that this will be a new experience for us, but I see it all as upside, honestly. We know we're going to pick 8 at the lowest, but 8 gives us five, if that's the case. We know we would have five. And the opportunity to add another player to me is a great thing.

If we end up moving up from here, like that would be fantastic, but we can't push a button and make that happen. If we started at the beginning of the season and thought that the Rocket swap was going to be where it is, we would never imagine that.

We have to see how it goes, and like I said before, keep our head and not overreact either way. We've got a lot of things to look forward to. The most important thing is we're not going to change the way we go about our business. We're not going to change the methodology about what drives success in Oklahoma City. I think we have a pretty good handle on that, and we understand the NBA ecosystem very, very well, and we have to -- unless we want to change our goals and aspirations, I think we have a clear plan that we have to follow, and I don't think there's any reason why we can't be successful.

I think I never want to be misunderstood when I say that. I think I'm just trying to be pragmatic. We can be extraordinarily successful here. We've done it. But it's



something that's going to take some time. It's going to take some good fortune at some point. And it's going to take some discipline, and it's going to take some persistence, which I think we're well equipped to have.

Q. You talked about the top five players in the draft. Everybody knows those names well. What's your view of this draft, just the entire draft? You probably don't want to get too specific, but just this draft as a whole, what do you think of it?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, my feeling is like I think every draft is pretty good. I don't think there's such a thing as a bad draft because you're talking about adding a lot of young talent into the NBA, and the talent never goes one, two, three, four, five, six, seven ever. The talent -- there's so many things that go into it, like one, the player has to stay healthy, and usually it doesn't matter how you start. Some guys come on later and in their third or fourth year really start to become real impact players and guys that start off fast may not sustain over the course. It's such a long race to be a successful NBA player, and it never is a very smooth or linear process. It's basically who can deal with a lot of setbacks and adversities, and I think that's a healthy thing.

But you know, the draft overall, I like it. I mean, we valued 16 for a reason, and we think there's going to be a good player there. That much you can do the math on. You can count to a certain number and get a better feel for like, hey, top 20 here, we feel pretty good about a bunch of these guys.

Again, with where we are as an organization, continuing to add the type of people -- I've said this since the day I was hired here, we draft people, we don't draft players, and I think that's one of the reasons why I think we've had success over the last 13 years is because the type of people that come in the door every day allow you to withstand the challenges that come with trying to strive to be the best version of yourself and the inevitable tough breaks that come along the way.

I'm excited about the people in this draft. I think there will be some guys that really fit well in our program.

Q. You guys are your own franchise and like you said, it's all pretty much luck, but are there any teams you look at and say that's the model you want to use when building your team, like the Warriors recently or how the Suns and Hawks have built their team recently?

SAM PRESTI: No, that's just not how I look at it. I think what we're trying to do is create our own identity.

I think one of the problems with that is that as soon as you start to try to mimic somebody else, something changes. To me I think that's where you get into trouble. I think you have to have independent thinking. I think you have to have a clear set of values that work for your organization, and if we trace those teams that you're referring to, and it could be any teams, doesn't matter, you could go back -- every one of those teams has a unique path, and there's an enormous amount of randomness that goes into why are we even talking about those teams.

I think a lot of times we kind of like just make a lot of snap judgments based on the results of things, but we don't take a lot of time to think about, well, how did that really happen, how many other ways could that have gone.

In the NBA the one thing you've got to remember is there's only one way for things to go right, and there's a million ways for them to go wrong. So when they go right, sometimes we think it was a given that that was going to happen, but it's really not like that.

I think if you map out your strategy or try to build your team to replicate another organization, you don't have that -- you don't have those same tenets or qualities, and I'm not even talking about the strategy part because you can't try to build your team in one city the way you could in another city. I enjoy that. I think it's great. I think if everybody had the same tools to work with, I don't think that would be particularly fun.

I don't look at it that way. The Thunder needs to stand on its own. It needs to be who we are, has to represent our city. I think that's a big factor. I think a team in Oklahoma City has to represent the values of the city and a community. That means a lot to us. That's what we speak to our players about all the time, and that's part of what makes us who we are. Like I said before, we stand for a lot more than what we do, and we draw a lot of inspiration from our local community and the values that the community possesses. We have to be our own. One of one.

Q. At 7:30 tonight, what's going to be your general mood or anxiety level? Will you get nervous? I know you can't do anything about it, but these ping-pong balls are going to determine some of your future for the next five, ten years. Are you nervous?

SAM PRESTI: Honestly I'm not going to be nervous. I'll be waiting to get the clarity, like I said before. I'll be excited. I think I'll be excited. But the clarity is the thing that I want. Like I said before, I can do without the show. That's irrelevant to me. If you just told me at 7:30 I was going to get an email with a list, I'd be just as happy. Probably

happier because we have a lot of work to do tonight once that happens, so we'll be able to get to it faster.

I don't really get attached to the -- to me, we're not losing anything. We're only gaining. So I don't really see -- we're not losing anything. It's only us gaining the opportunity to add another player to the team.

If we can do really well and draft high, I mean, I'm certainly all for that, but I don't see the -- this is not something we control. I would probably feel more internal emotion when I'm deciding who to pick. That's a different process to me.

But at that point we already kind of know who we're picking so we're just kind of following our plan for the night, the draft. But making decisions, knowing that even when you make a decision on a player, so much is out of your control anyway. I've tried to be very open and humble about the fact that when guys do well here, it's not because we have some great secret, and when guys don't do well, I don't think it's because we forgot what we're doing or have no idea what we're doing.

I think there's luck and chance in everything in life, and I think in sports it's like super magnified.

We'll wait and find out, but I don't think I'm going to be nervous or anxious. I'm probably going to be excited to see where we're picking so we can get started on the stuff that we all love to do. But I'm not going to -- it's so far out of our hands.

I do think we're in a great position, so we've just got to find out what that really looks like, and now we need to go to work from there. I don't believe this is a singular event. We're going to continue to build our team. There will be other opportunities to add players, whether it's a trade deadline or a free agency period.

This particular event happens to have a significantly disproportionate effect on things, but it doesn't make it -- it doesn't change just because you have no control over it. I'm not going to mislead anybody and say that this isn't a very meaningful moment for the franchise. It is. But it's not something that we control.

What we control is how we respond and react to that. I know how we will. I'm very confident. I know the people I work with, and we're going to put our -- roll our sleeves up and we're going to crank and figure out how to make the most of the situation no matter what it is.

Q. Is there anything to be learned from what the Hawks and the Suns have done to get to the Final Four? I think you've really addressed it.

SAM PRESTI: Was I clear on that? I think we need to see the parity -- parity is not a one-year thing. Parity is a sustained level of diverse outcomes. I think that's what everybody in the NBA wants. That's what competition is about.

What the Suns and Hawks have done is remarkable. It's great. We want to be back in that moment, as well, at some point. We went to four out of six of them, and we had -- and the two we didn't get to, we had some pretty rough injury situations.

But it's a great level. Those are great franchises, but I don't think it's telling. I think we need to see a little more evidence to -- that's not taking anything away from them. They've gotten there the right way and they have great teams and I think they'll be good in the future, too.

Q. Have you measured the reaction to this season, the reaction of the fan base and your corporate partners? Have you taken a measure of that, or is it just something that had to be -- it was inevitable that this kind of a season was going to happen because it happens to everybody? Have you measured kind of what the reaction was state-wide?

SAM PRESTI: Are you talking about the pandemic?

Q. No, the season, the record.

SAM PRESTI: No, I don't -- no, we haven't done that. I think this season in and of itself is -- there was no fans. I mean, it was a pandemic, and everyone was just trying to get through this thing healthy, population-wise, and the team was the same thing, trying to get everybody through here healthy, and we're fortunate that we had good health. It enabled us to make the trade with Boston in advance of the draft and free agency and all those things.

Listen, you can go back in history, and let's just use an example that Myron used. Phoenix, they haven't been to the Playoffs in 10 years. But now people in Phoenix are really excited. There are periods of time that franchises go through, and they go through journeys or paths. Atlanta, similar thing. Been out of the Playoffs for a while. Even the Lakers were out of the Playoffs for six years. The Utah Jazz, another conference finalist -- not Conference Finals, second-round team. They were out of the Playoffs for four years.

I think sometimes we forget these things because it's just human nature. The longer you want to be good, the more patience sometimes it requires, unless there's a path that opens itself up that is there. We're not going to ignore that.



I said before, if we could throw our doors open and have two prime-aged free agents walk in the door and vault us to 50 wins for the next four years, sign us up for that.

Short of that happening, we have to find a solution that's different. I want to be clear about this. That's not us saying this is too hard or unfair -- it's not. This is the reality. We can absolutely be successful, 100 percent. But it would be a little bit ignorant for us to say that after 13 years of winning 50 games. It's not going to take a little time for us.

If we wanted to measure things on time, I think you're really limiting the upside of your team, so you're getting away from making what may be the best long-term decisions to try to meet an arbitrary time period.

I don't know that that would be the best business decision in the long-term for our fans or community or for the team.

Q. This time last year we were just in the early stages of the pandemic and everything else. We're not out of it but we're making good progress. Does that change anything how things have gone to prepare for the draft that you're still getting ready for?

SAM PRESTI: Well, we're still a little limited. There's still some limitations.

You know, again, my point of view on this is whatever the circumstances are, whatever the hand is that we get provided, as long as it's equal to the other teams, you'll never, ever hear me complain. I will not say a word because I'm all about equality and fairness when it comes to just the opportunities that everybody has to meet their goals since we're all measured by the same thing. There's only one thing to win in the NBA, which is a championship.

It's very rare to do that, and in order to do that, you need an unusual amount of good fortune along the way, not just once you get to the moment and the ball bounces three times for Toronto and it goes through the basket and Philadelphia is eliminated, or even the other night with Brooklyn and Milwaukee with the ridiculously difficult and amazing shot that Kevin made. These are the things that generally separate wins and losses. But there's other instances of that along the way in different times that you need to have some good fortune with, as well.

I don't think that anything here -- I don't think we're set back in any way. I don't think we're limited in any way from us doing our job because everybody is dealing with the same circumstances.

We're going to need some good fortune. Every team does.

There's not a team in the league that doesn't need that. We're the same. But as I said before, if we don't get some good fortune tonight, that's okay, because if we stay persistent and we stay relentless, which is I think one of the traits of our organization, we're going to have some things go our way along the way, and when that happens, we have to take advantage of it.

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