

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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## Sam Presti

Press Conference



**Q. Obviously exciting for the organization to be able to bring in a guy like Isaiah. What was it like for you to be able to get a guy like him, specifically him, to come in?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, anytime we have an opportunity to improve the team, certainly with somebody that we feel fits the organization and also the way we play, as well, it's a great opportunity.

I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the fact that Mr. Bennett in these types of situation is tremendous. Our ownership group is just awesome. We've been so blessed over the time that we've been here, not just with their support but with the way that they operate together. They're a great example for everybody in terms of how they operate as a team, supporting one another and allowing Clay to kind of be the person that leads the charge in the group.

But days like today aren't possible without that kind of support, and we've been fortunate to have that for quite a while.

**Q. On the floor there seems to be a rapport that he built with his teammates on the bench, the camaraderie he seems to have, as well. Just on the personal side of his ability to develop relationships, anything that you have seen or noticed from him?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, just following his trajectory and his career over the time he's been in the NBA, his units play well together. He's got a great mentality for the team. I think his game also makes a difference in that way because he's a connecting player. People want to play with players like that. And he's worked extremely hard to get to this point in his career, and he's still very young.

So that's one of the things that we're also really excited about is he's a young player that is still developing, exploring his game, and we're excited to do that with him.

**Q. I don't want to assume anything, but I imagine you**

**don't usually fly to people's hometowns to try to acquire them. Is there anything that adds to the trip and the significance of it to try to go get him?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, we've done that in the past, and when we've been in different meetings or settings, things like that, it's something we've always tried to do just from a personal standpoint.

But in this case it's similar to an opportunity to be with the person, try to hear where they're coming from, what's important to them, and then lay out what it is that we're trying to accomplish and how they fit into that.

I thought I was going to Houston, but it ended up that it was Oregon, so either way, when it comes to trying to make the team better, when it comes to trying to make the Thunder better, we'll go across the world if we have to do that, and in this case that was a relatively short trip for what the outcome was.

**Q. What did you learn about him during that trip?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, you spend a lot of time researching players, watching players, talking to people about them, but there's no substitute to actually sitting down in front of them and listening. I think in those types of situations, the default for a lot of people is to do a lot of talking.

I think it's more important for us to do more listening in those situations, try to understand their story from their point of view, what are they trying to accomplish at that point in their career, how we might be able to help them do that and also help our team, as well.

I think that was a big part of it, learning about his family, a lot of the different journeys he's been on, situations he's been in, things that have helped him, how to help him explore his potential, and also line that up with the aspirations we have as a team and organization.

**Q. You've talked in the past about not compromising what you do when you add someone. Talk about how he fits in to the way you play.**

SAM PRESTI: Well, we've talked about that end of last season, probably previous years, as well. We're looking for players that help us strengthen our strengths, also help

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us improve our limitations, but not at the expense of the overall collective of the team or the strengths that I was talking about.

I think he does that pretty swiftly. He's going to help us in some areas that we've wanted to improve, but I think in his ability to do that, he's not taking away from some of the things that we do well. That's pretty rare.

You can oftentimes just go out there and look to fill a need with the lowest common denominator or what's available at that particular time. You can feel good about that in a moment, but shortly thereafter you'll see that there could be two or three other things that have now become problems that weren't in the past.

I think he does that easily. He's a connecting player. He's a smart player. He plays our style of basketball.

He also happens to be, like, a big player, which I know people were very focused on, but I think the thing to notice about him more than anything is he's a good basketball player. He happens to play the center spot, but he's a good basketball player. We want people that process the game like that, play both sides of the ball, good teammate, extreme professional.

Feel really good about the professionalism and the seriousness of both Alex and Isaiah in terms of how they carry themselves, how they approach their craft, what we're bringing into the building.

So all those things I think make him a really good fit in that way.

**Q. More pick-and-roll with him, because he's not going to step out and shoot threes like Chet, but his strengths on offense --**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think, again, that's going to take some time. That's really a Mark question in terms of how we want to deploy him.

But when you have a player that can read the game the way he does, is comfortable with the ball in his hands, that opens up so many things for us. It gives us someone different in terms of how he approaches the position, which I think is good.

I think, as I said at the end of the season, we're not trying to prove anybody wrong with our play style. We're not rigidly committed to one way or another. I think what we don't want to be is ordinary, and at the same time, you want to be diverse, and I think what his addition does is it takes us from being unorthodox in a lot of ways to being

more diverse.

I think he just bolsters what it is that we do.

**Q. Given the draft picks that you got, signed the free agents, Joe and Wiggins, is this about as smooth an off-season as you've had in a minute?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, they're all different. They're all different. It doesn't really matter what it looks like right now, obviously. We have to go out, kind of go back to square one.

Whether or not we made these additions or we didn't, we were going to have the same challenge in front of us. Everybody understands how good the Western Conference is. It's been excellent in the past. I think it's at peak level now more than ever.

I think one of the things that's helped accelerate our team and our performance and our development as a team is the fact that we play in the west. Every single night we're out there, we're on the razor's edge of competition. You really have to have your game together. It's not an easy conference to play in, and I think that's helped our team develop quickly.

At the same time, we're not going to walk into the season with any wins from last year. We're going to have to kind of go back and stack days, stack experiences. As trite as that sounds, it really is unfortunately the path to improvement and success, and our ability to maintain that mentality from training camp on and really work on the things that drive success. That's going to be kind of the formula that we have to follow.

**Q. He's the highest profile free agent you've signed. Costliest, also. How tough was the sell, did you sense?**

SAM PRESTI: I don't know. Well, the first thing is you have to acknowledge the fact that Isaiah was coming from a great situation. I think the worst thing you could do is to walk into a situation and try to diminish the current place that the player has played in. I think showing a lot of respect for that, respecting how hard a decision can be like that for a player, especially when they've had success, personal and collective.

You can only put your best foot forward. I think it's less about thinking about the past with the other team and more about trying to paint a picture of the future with your team and what that can potentially look like.

Part of that for us was him being 26, our belief that we can



continue his development and put him in situations to continue to expand his strengths and what it is that he does well.

But these are really tough decisions for free agents. They've earned the right to make these decisions, and all you can do is try to go out there and express what you see and what could be. You put your best foot forward.

Fortunately for us, I think he was able to see some of the things we were talking about, and we're excited that he's chosen to come with us.

**Q. Do you remember much about him during the draft process?**

SAM PRESTI: A little bit. I mean, there's been a lot of drafts. But yeah, absolutely. Remember him through the draft and then we followed him closely through his time in the league. Especially as we've been moving into our current approach and play style, there's certain players that really resonate for us that we feel like can amplify what it is that we do that we feel like we might be able to help, as well.

The thing with him that also is important is obviously he's a connecting player. He fits kind of the general style of play, but his game doesn't conflict with the development of our core players.

He's in a position - I think Caruso was similar - they both bring things to the team that are very additive, that are true to what it is that we want to do on and off the court, but they also are not taking away from the experiences that Shai, Chet and Jaylen are going to have to have in order to continue on their trajectories.

It's rare to hit all those marks, but Isaiah did that.

**Q. Does this chip away at that notion small markets can't compete in the free agent market? Guys want to get paid, but they want to win.**

SAM PRESTI: I think the thing that happens in those situations is it's really a case-by-case situation. The way I've always looked at that is there's going to be people that gravitate toward what it is that we're about and trying to accomplish, and there will be other people that don't prioritize it quite like that, and that's why they call it free agency. It's a decision. It's a freedom of choice.

The people that we are really interested in, we're hoping that they resonate with the things that we're about and what we're trying to accomplish. I wouldn't make just a totally blanket statement, but certainly history has

demonstrated that free agency is not usually something that all markets are participating in.

I think we were fortunate in this case because Isaiah is a guy that's come up with a winding path. He's earned everything. He has worked himself into being an excellent player individually, but as I said earlier, his units play really well together pretty much anywhere he's been.

The other thing I really like about him is he's looking forward about other ways he can improve and he can get better.

A lot of people would get an opportunity like this and they'd be thinking about -- kind of looking back, and I think he's actually looking forward. He's looking at what's next, how do I improve, thinking about how to set up his home gym and his weight room.

Those are the kind of guys we want to have.

I always remember when we signed Lu to his first extension, and the first thing he said to me was, Now I can hire my trainer full time. That's when you know you're investing in the right people.

It's the same thing with Isaiah. Isaiah saying, all right, I've got to get my home gym set up. These are the professionals and the types of people that we want to populate the building with, Caruso, Hartenstein. The other guys that we have are thinking about their profession in a different way, and we want to continue to populate the team with those types of mentalities.

**Q. Thinking of Isaiah and Chet, how they might look specifically, what do you think they can be together?**

SAM PRESTI: It's hard for me to sit here and say I know what that looks like, other than to say if you have smart players that are all about the people, something good probably will come from that. Isaiah understands walking in that we have a good team, that Chet is extremely impactful at the 5, but we also have been very open about the fact that we're not married to one way of doing things, but we certainly know that that's a big part of our formula, and he knows that walking in.

We don't make promises on minutes; we don't make promises on roles. We make promises on environment and trying to put the team in the best position to be successful. He wasn't asking for that, either.

I'm kind of excited to see where we end up with the particular group that we have and how it all works together. But I will also say, from Isaiah and Alex, no one is asking

us questions about that kind of thing because I think it demonstrates kind of where they are in their careers, how they think about basketball, how they process teams, and that's great to have.

But we'll look at a lot of different things, I'm sure. Mark is always looking at different things, tinkering with different things, and I'm excited to see how it all comes together.

But it will take some time. I think that's one thing that we have to recognize. We'll be incorporating two guys into the team that have previous NBA experience in addition to some of the guys we got in the draft, and we have to give it a chance to kind of coalesce and figure it out, and there will probably be some bumps in the road, but that's what we have to do in order to get to where we want to go.

**Q. The extensions for Wiggins and Joe, just curious, what have you learned about those two guys that have led them to the point where they get long-term extensions?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it's really great to see that. Again, both of those guys have come from different paths. I used this as an example with some people the other day, our coaches for Summer League the other day about remaining open, remaining non-judgmental, having a beginner's mindset when we're looking at younger players in Summer League.

I kind of posed the question that when Aaron Wiggins was playing his first Summer League, did anyone in the room raise their hand and say he was going to be signing a five-year extension for us in a few years, and the answer is no, nobody knows those things.

When you go out and watch everybody in Summer League, we're all humans and people generally want to get to the fastest answer possible with as little work as possible, and that's where we get into these big judgments and plant our flag on things and hopefully no one remembers when we're so wrong.

Wiggins has really kind of beat the door down. He's been extremely mature. He has taken it step by step. He's got a great mindset for the type of player that he is, and he has earned his way into the situation.

Isaiah, very similar. He was without a team there for a second, was cut from Philadelphia, came into our situation with no real -- like no wind at his back at all. Didn't play right away, was trying to adapt in season to a new team that was trying to find their way, as well, and turned a few minutes into a lot of minutes and became a pretty invaluable player for our particular team.

Again, different paths, but we kind of like those types of guys. We tend to do well with them.

That's something that we're not looking for everybody to have everything handed to them. Like I said before, there's no silver platters in Oklahoma City. We understand that. That is part of the fuel for us as a collective group.

I think Caruso, Isaiah, Joe, Wiggins, Hartenstein, I think all these guys, some of the guys that we've drafted, they're coming from behind, and we like those types of guys. We want to try to invest in those people and put as many of them together because they're hungry, they're grateful, and they're driven.

Those are pretty important qualities for success.

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