

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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## Sam Presti

### Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: Just want to thank everybody for coming this afternoon. Have a few opening remarks.

This is my opportunity to speak kind of directly to our fans, so I like to take a few minutes to just go over a few things that I may never get to say to them once the season really gets underway. I always appreciate that opportunity. Then we'll get to as many questions as we can from everybody.

Just want to kind of begin by thinking back to the op ed that I wrote a few years ago, and in that I talked a lot about just the totality of seasons that we had had to that point in Oklahoma City. Over the last 16 years, one of the things that I think we've come to learn is that every season in the history of the Thunder is a chapter in and of itself. It's how it lines up in the catalog of total seasons is really for history to kind of determine after that season is over.

What we have this year is really the opportunity to write the 17th chapter, and we're really excited about doing that.

As we've gone through this period of time since we've been here, we've tried to build a team or teams of our own design that are built on the values and the principles of our community and the things that we really believe in as an organization that we want to represent.

Each step of the way, expectations have followed us. Sometimes really high, sometimes pretty low. Most of the time pretty high. Those external expectations are things that we have seen internally or we internalize as possibilities. We see those external expectations as possibilities.

The difference is that external expectations are things that some people think should happen, and possibilities are things that we feel could happen, but we have a lot of respect for how hard it is for those things to take place. We don't think we're entitled to start on third base. We never have. And we don't expect anything to be handed over to us in any way.

That's why we've always focused on being pacesetters



versus clock watchers. We haven't really got too involved with the external conversations. We've really just kind of focused on the things we can do with the season that we have, and then we'll see where that all fits into the history of the team down the road.

The principles are the same from when we began to reposition, replenish and rebuild the team in 2008, and then again around 2021. The thing that we've also learned is that when we've made those pivots, the team has been extremely young, and those teams to our benefit have maintained their youth over a long period of time because they started so young.

As far as this season goes, I think the longer I do this, I realize that if we're doing it well, we begin the season essentially staring at a blank canvas and basically starting over with a beginner's mindset. No rigid rules, not tied to certain assumptions, willing to be open and curious about whatever it is the team is going to signal to us over the course of time.

The focus has always been on learning and growing through the experiences that the team is able to cobble together, good or bad. I think that's served us quite well over the course of time.

This year we have two significant additions, I think everybody knows, with Isaiah Hartenstein and Alex Caruso. And I think our experience with Chet last year is informative for us because we didn't take Chet into the season and try to wedge him into the team that existed for him. We kind of broke things down and allowed ourselves to kind of, like I said earlier, stay open to whatever the signals were and to learn the trade-offs of each one of those decisions.

I think that's a healthy way to look at it for us, and I think it's something that we'll need to adopt or repeat in this case.

One other thing I think that's important that we've learned is that in any process, it's more important to know what is going to slow you down than what's going to speed you up, and through that kind of exploration, I think we've learned a lot of those things.

We're going to need some time with this particular group, especially because we're not trying to wedge those guys in

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or have assumptions about how they're going to fit with certain players. We kind of have to allow that to take its course, and as a result I think our continuity will not be great early, but if you look at continuity in the NBA, continuity generally shows up, or lack thereof, early in the year.

I don't think it will be a big issue for us once we get into the year, we get some miles underneath us. The more you play together, the more you rep together, the more you learn. We'll just need to kind of get some of that moving in order for us to get the kind of continuity that we'd like to have with this particular team.

We've always seen the regular season as an opportunity to recover the team. I do think as people we generally all want to get ahead with what we already know. I don't think you can do that in the NBA. I think especially with 82 games.

One of my favorite authors Robert Caro has a great saying about research, where he says, "You have to turn every single page," and I really like that relative to what it is that we have to do in order to discover the team.

We have to really understand and go through every iteration to ensure that we're not shutting off potential pathways that could really help us or get us to another level, whether it's now or in the future. That's really helped us find competitive advantages in the past, whether it's lineup constructions, end-of-game situations, player development pathways, player combinations, schematics, thematics.

I think by turning every page, you give yourself every opportunity.

I think we're also getting to the point in time as a team where there are some things in the regular season that have to be worked through and others that have to be worked around, where there's certain things that we're going to have to confront, even if that means not getting the immediate benefits or the numbers might not look particularly good, but ultimately we're going to have to get good at addressing these particular situations, issues, whatever it might be.

We could work around it. We could scheme around it. But ultimately I think that makes you more fragile, and it makes you more breakable when you're ultimately going to be in situations where you're going to have to confront these things as a team.

I think that happens for you as you become better. So there will be some situations where we have to lose a

battle to win the war, so to speak, and I think that's a healthy place to be for us in getting to that point.

I think you've heard me talk about how do we continue to expand the potential of the team or the possibilities of the team. I've always felt and still feel that a lot of that has to do with just our play style. I think it's built to scale. I think it's really good for that.

A lot of those things come back to less patterns, more rhythm. We've talked about that in the past. I think when the team is in sync and the team is on time, we're much harder to play against, like any team. But that takes a lot of work and great intention and great patience to try to capture that because it's really elusive.

But when the team is in rhythm and we're playing instinctively, it makes us a much harder team to guard, like I said. It takes also the degree of difficulty for our best players and makes it much lesser. It also allows our role players to have better opportunities at success.

And I think the hardest thing in the NBA is to get everyone on the floor playing well at the same time, and that's, like, the holy grail for everybody. We capture it, like I say, but it doesn't stay with you very long. That's always what we're looking to try to do.

I think the other thing for us is, and we've done a great job of this to this point, is just trying to avoid your turn/my turn play, because that's like -- you can default to that so easy with talented players, but I think ultimately that will kind of cap the team. It makes us easier to play against.

Again, that's not something I think we've struggled with, but you have to be able to resist that, especially early in the games and early in the regular season.

If you've been around the NBA, you know that every season has ebbs and flows to it. We've talked about every team gets thunderstormed on, rained on, three or four times a year where it seems like the sky is falling, and when it's not on you, it's on five other teams. That's never going to change.

We know that when that happens, externally people will lose their minds. That is part of the world we live in. We have to exist within that. It's not changing. It's perfectly fine.

We've said before, social media is a sport, but scrolling is a lifestyle, and that is something that everybody has to understand as we do what we do. You can get off the train at any point you want. We're all still on it for some reason, but it's because we love it.

Another way of looking at the ebbs and flows is that it's really optimistically, the way I look at it, it's really growth and repair of a team. Every time the team is growing, it's breaking something that it's existing as, and it could make it harder, but then after we get better from that, you have to kind of move on from there. That's what I was talking about working through things versus trying to kind of finagle your way around them.

I think if we see it as growth and repair, I think you can take some of those lessons and throw them into the future, but sometimes there will be some plateaus and some regressions, and those are the times I think we can be at our best because even in that ecosystem that we all exist, I think the team has done an excellent job of focusing on internal standards and not external conversations.

I think it's remarkable for a young group of players to have that mindset, and I think we have to work hard to try to continue to protect that as we go forward.

Last thing on the season and the length of it, I think the depth of teams in the league and I think depth in general is really important. I think depth relative to the parity in the league that we see now is directly linked because the teams are so deep.

But I also think it's important for these reasons. Midway through the season last year, there was a change in the points of emphasis relative to the officiating, so we saw a much more physical game. We like that. We're for that. We're certainly not against that in any way. We think it's probably better to have a balanced game.

But you're still introducing a level of physicality into the game every single night that's going to wear anybody down. Couple that with the fact that the second half of the season is more compressed with less days off and more games, more travel days than we've seen in 10 to 12 years, and you're going to see just the attrition of the league probably change a little bit more, but to get a better product, which is totally understandable. But I think depth matters there.

The icing on the cake for all of that relative to the depth is the pace of the modern game is much different, so the days are the same. There's still 24 hours in the day. There was always physical basketball. But the amount of torque on the bodies and the way in which -- and how many possessions there are within a modern NBA game is just a different load. That's why I think the depth is important to all teams, not just to our team, and I think we're well-positioned for that.

If we're turning every page, as we talked about, we'll find some things out of that, as well, if we stay curious about it.

I'd just like to hit the op ed one more time here. I think when we talk about that period of time, I was really trying to explain a series of seasons, and sometimes people get lost, they forget a lot of the seasons because generally as people, myself included, we think about the beginning or we think of the end, and a lot of times we lose sight of the value of the middle of a journey.

What we all know is that the middle is always the longest part of anything that you're doing. At some point we're going to hit the middle. I don't know that we're there yet. The way I would define the middle is when your best-laid plans, your visions and aspirations don't unfold sequentially in A, B, C, D, E, F, they don't go in order for you. For most of us, that's reality. But when you hit that period of time, generally that's where the novelty wears off, regression happens, plateaus happen. There could be some bad luck or some good luck that comes in there.

I think a lot of times that's where people tend to abandon their principles or their practices and they kind of lose their way a little bit because the middle really is the longest part, and at some point we'll confront that.

But I think when we do, hopefully some of the lessons we're learning now will be able to stabilize us, guide us and help us maintain our position in order to work through that. I think that's just something that's important because that's the type of organization that we want to all be a part of in this building. All the people that I work with, that I have the benefit of learning from, I think we all want to be a part of something that can endure over a period of time. That's what we're focused on.

Just in closing to our fans, and then we'll get to everyone's questions, there's no silver platters in Oklahoma. I've said that before. There's no silver platters in Oklahoma. But I would say, anything is possible. It just can't be expected and shouldn't be expected to be handed over or to be easy.

We as an organization and as a team have to earn our arrival, and we have one season to try to do that with, because that's all we have in front of us. That's the opportunity we have.

We've got an extremely young, energetic, ambitious team that's constantly striving, and they're inspiring people to be around. They inspire me. What we're trying to do is be the exception to an age-old rule in pro sports, which is you cannot win at the highest level with young teams.

We recognize that in order to be exceptional, in order to be that team, you have to be willing to be an exception, and for us that means staying curious, staying open, knowing -- you can't find it if you're not looking and turning every page. That is really, for us, really important, irrespective of the external conversation or expectation to be able to protect ourselves and maintain that mentality that has served us so well.

We don't know how chapter 17 is going to be remembered within the final catalog of Thunder history, and we don't expect to know that. We don't know how the season is going to unfold. We don't expect to know that, either.

All we have is the present, and we have the possibility of establishing ourselves in making our arrival in the Western Conference, which is what we've set out to try to be able to do over time. All we really know how to do here is to use those opportunities and just press on, just keep pressing on, come regression or progression. We have to press on. I think we have the type of mentality with our players and our builder that are up for that challenge.

That's kind of my voice to the fans. We're super grateful for every one of them, especially those that have been with us from the very beginning. I'm happy to take any questions from you guys.

**Q. Maybe this is tough to answer in a vacuum, but could you describe how difficult it is to assemble a second contender less than 10 years after the last one?**

SAM PRESTI: You know, I don't want to get ahead of ourselves there. I think we really do try to take it one year at a time, and I think for us, with the age of the team and the pursuit of trying to make an arrival, as we've talked about for many years now, I think that's kind of where our eye is on the ball there.

There's so many different possibilities to how a season can go, and we have to accept that those possibilities could go into what you're talking about, a contending level team. That doesn't have to go that way.

There's probably more ways that it could go the opposite. If we take our eye off the ball -- I don't want to start referring to ourselves or thinking of ourselves like that, but we're certainly capable of doing that.

Then the other question about kind of looking back at the first cycle, I would just say there will be a time for that, to see it all in totality, but truly, we just have a couple chapters written on this mountain. I think those will be best understood over a long period of time. I don't know that we

can almost look at them or compare them at this point.

**Q. You mentioned this team is going to have to be an exception. For the fans in the off-season, whether it's players or structure of how coaches did things, to sort of speak to that, guys doing things that you think might help get you to that exception?**

SAM PRESTI: I think that's a great question. I'd like to think that the seeds of those things have been planted a long time ago. I think the challenge for us will be executing and staying true to our DNA on the way we think about developing, growing and sustaining teams under the -- kind of under whatever external expectations are going to be forced upon us, and that's our job.

That's why I've said we're not running from the expectations in any way, shape or form. We didn't run from them when people were picking us to win 10 games because if we did, we would have won 10 games. We just would have packed it up and said, well, that's what we're going to be.

We exceeded those, but not because -- we're not competing against the internet. We're not competing against the expectations. We are taking it all in as this is possible. Whatever we want is possible, but we have to go about it with a different way of thinking.

This season I don't think is much different than other years, whether it's -- in past years we played three point guards at one time. We didn't know how that would go. We handed the ball to Shai. We didn't know if he could play full-time point guard for us because he had never done it before.

We took some risks. We played a guy at center all last season that a lot of people didn't think was a center. Turned out to be extremely good for us. We threw a guy named Lu Dort out on the court when we had some injuries, and he performed at a high level.

I think that's the curiosity I'm talking about, and some of the exception is maybe being non-conformist so the things that people have grown accustomed to when they watch basketball or sports in that way.

**Q. You talked at the end of the season how you went into the postseason (indiscernible). I was wondering how you feel about this particular group with that statement, and after trading Josh and bringing in a guy like Isaiah for the same position.**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so it's what I was saying before about, like, growth and repair. For us, I think we're at our best when we're in sync and we're on time. The pass

generally does that. I think there's a difference between moving the ball and passing the ball. To me, moving the ball is when you have nowhere else to go with it. Passing is when you're keeping the energy of the ball and giving your teammate time to make decisions, whatever it might be. Passing keeps you in rhythm. Moving the ball doesn't keep the possession flowing, if that makes any sense.

I think one of the things that Josh did for us was, especially early in games and early in halves, would keep our rhythm moving. That's certainly something we're capable of doing and we will do, but it will take intentionality and it will take consistency to do it.

But I think the real value of being a good passing team is it's the creation of time, and the better the player is, the less time they need.

Most players, especially in the NBA, are so good, they don't need a lot of time compared to most people, but every fraction of a second matters to be able to process and make the next decision. That's why when I talk about playing with the pass, it's really about creating more time within the possession to make quality decisions and to stay in rhythm so people can anticipate and play at their best.

That's like this holy grail I was talking about. You don't just press a button and get there. But that's something we'll have to continue to pursue.

But our intentions have always been great in that area. It's the experience that we need to gain on that.

**Q. You've long talked about play style, and just even when you talk about passing, you put it -- you use musical terms. Just given your musical background, being a fan of music, what are some of the parallels you see there?**

SAM PRESTI: You know, it's not like I'm trying to do that, honestly, and I think maybe early on when I was doing this, I stayed away from that because I didn't think that's what people wanted to hear. But I kind of got to the point, I guess you get older and you're just like, I don't really care anymore. I'm going to say what I -- this is how I think about it.

It doesn't mean it's right. You might be like, this is a bunch of BS. That doesn't bother me. But this is how I process what I do.

But I think there's -- it's all interconnected, whether it's sports or art or anything else you're doing, especially teams. Those are, like, living, breathing things. They change all the time. I think having a healthy respect for the

fact that it's not a formula, and the people that are involved in it, they're all going through different things and they're all changing all the time. You just know that there's not an end point. That's the way I would look at how I think I'm answering these questions.

The musical part is, yeah, that's just my -- that's how I see things, because of my experiences. A lot of times when people have disagreements about stuff, it's not because of differing opinions, it's because of different experiences. You may have a different -- you may have lived a different experience. The other person has lived a different experience. That doesn't mean that one is right or one is wrong, but you can only work with what you know.

That's just mine. Someone else could disagree with that, but that's probably because they may not have the same personal experience and I don't have theirs.

**Q. There's a lot of excitement coming into this season. You've talked about those true blue fans, the ones that have stuck with the team throughout those tough seasons and how great that commitment will feel when this team makes it back into the postseason. What would you say to those fans?**

SAM PRESTI: Kind of like what I was saying earlier, I think -- well, one, I hope they really enjoyed that season because we talked about that kind of leading up to it. At some point we had the two years -- one year we didn't have fans in the building, so it was a little different, but for the time that they weren't seeing a team that they were used to seeing -- there was a bunch of new people, new players, and the results weren't where we wanted them to be.

I was hoping that they'd be really energized when we did finally make it back, whenever that would be. No one could have predicted that we'd be in the postseason that quickly, play-in and then postseason.

But the thing that always strikes me about our fans, and I think it's pretty unique to here -- and it literally happened to me yesterday. When someone comes up and talks to you about the team, and the two most recent examples for me were people that recently retired, they don't just say, like, we're excited for the season. They really talk about how the team has really helped to change the city for the better.

I think it's very rare in sports that the people -- there's a difference. They're not just spectating the game. They're seeing the whole picture of the team and how it has helped drive different things in the city, and it's given them more pride in different ways. That's pretty special. That revs me up personally.

I know that -- and then after that will be, we're really excited for the season or maybe a comment or two about something that's happened or a favorite player.

But the fact that it's not just spectating but it's seeing it, seeing the whole thing, is pretty cool, and I really value that.

I'm really grateful for the true blue folks. That says a lot. Most of those folks that say these things, they're like, I had tickets on day one, and many of them for the Hornets. They're so invested, they've seen the evolution of not just the team but also of the community during that period of time, and we're really lucky to be a part of that, what people would call like the Renaissance of the city. People that have been here much longer than myself would call it that. So yeah, that's what I would say.

**Q. A lot of talk about you guys being young. Truth is your best players have actually played quite a few games together relative to other teams. Can that continuity -- you talked about continuity. Can that actually be a strength even though you guys are young?**

SAM PRESTI: Great question. It's all relative to how much continuity there is in the league, so we may have a lot, or that group of guys may have a certain amount that looks like a lot now, but in reality, compared to the way the teams were, may not be that much.

I think that goes back to Daniel's question about the time or how I was answering the question about time. That to me is the value of continuity, and I think because it's a team sport, continuity is that much more important because it comes down to anticipation, knowing one another, how you have not just on-court continuity but you have off-court continuity, like how you know different teammates respond to different things, situations that you've been in together.

Those shared experiences, what we call them here, those are so invaluable, even if they're not the best outcome that you want.

It can be a strength, but I think for us, it's not just the continuity of two or three guys, four guys. We're now introducing two significant players into that, and you kind of have to get to the bottom and go back to the top of the slide. That's kind of an arduous process to do that.

But we're up for that. That's how we do it, and that's -- one, a part of the calculus of bringing two significant players into the fold as new additions. You're taking on the risk of the breaking continuity, you're taking on different

risks relative to kind of your different team dynamic, but those are trade-offs we're more than willing to make for those particular players. I wouldn't say we're just going to do that for anybody.

**Q. Camp hasn't started, but there's a lot of talk about Chet and what he could become. Did you notice anything in the off-season that led you to any other conclusions about where he is right now?**

SAM PRESTI: You know, I kind of try not to watch too closely some of the off-season training. I try not to put too much stock in some of that.

The one thing about Chet I'll say is that no one is going to put more time or thought into what it is that he's doing and why. He will talk basketball as long as you want to talk about it; you know what I mean? Because he's genuinely really interested in it.

I think I've had some quips about him in the past because he's quip worthy. I think the thing about him is he is extraordinarily ambitious but he has no agenda, and that to me is -- I believe our team has benefitted from that mindset in general. Extremely ambitious, but it's really all the same agenda, which is prioritizing winning.

I think Chet is a great ambassador for that in a lot of ways because he's going to work on all his individual stuff. He's going to have it all mapped out. But when it's game time and it's 5-on-5 and it's time to win, he's going to figure out what the team needs to do, and I think that's one of his greatest attributes.

**Q. How is Topic doing?**

SAM PRESTI: He's good. I saw him this morning for a little while. He's got a great mind for what it is that he's working through. He was able to get back to Serbia for a little bit.

I think that is always good for a young person, when -- that draft process, you're gone, because you're traveling, you're going to these different teams and you're in New York and then you've got Summer League. I think getting home was good for him. Hadn't seen a lot of his friends and family.

But he's got the makeup to maximize this window of time that he has. We've got a great team around him, and he certainly won't be left behind in any way. I think this could really benefit him.

**Q. Expansion seems imminent sometime in the next few years at least. Just wondering your general thoughts on that from a league standpoint, and also**

**how the rules could affect you guys and how you prepare for something like that.**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I definitely can't talk specifically about expansion because there's no telling when or if that could even be talked about or discussed. And if and when it does, it's really a decision for the 30 owners, and way over my head.

I can speak a little bit about the rules. I think if and when that ever happens, I think the thing to note about the rules, or a lot of the expansion rules, relative to the personnel stuff were written in like 1980. They haven't been changed since 1980.

One thing that we know about Adam Silver since he's been the commissioner, and I think he's done an unbelievable job of this, is he has modernized the league in every single possible way. I think we're the most sophisticated league in a lot of different ways. The idea of working off a set of rules that were used when Bird and Magic were rookies, I don't think that's going to meet the smell test for his administration.

I also think, again, we've come a long way and the world has changed since this period of time.

One thing I think the league is really focused on, as well, is if there's a team or teams that are well-managed, you're not going to be randomly disadvantaged. So I think as -- if that ever comes about, I'm sure there will be plenty of focus and work to make sure that there's parity of opportunity and ultimately fairness about those rules, and also team building is so much different than it was at that point in time.

But those rules made it through '80 to 2004, and I'm sure every step of the way Adam has looked at every square inch of the league to make sure that it's fair, but it's also modern, and I'm sure they'll do that again.

But that may not ever come to pass because I don't know if they'll ever decide to do that.

**Q. Can you reflect on the maturation of Shai, when he gets here as a 20, 21-year-old kid, now he's a husband, father?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it's been remarkable. It's really, really been remarkable to see the evolution of him as a player and as a person. As I said before, I love being around the guys that we have. I went to his camp this summer. It's in his high school gym. A lot of people that he grew up with, teachers, are part of that.

I think the thing about Shai and Lu, because they've been here the longest, is they're really the same guys that I remember meeting when they walked through the door. That's the greatest compliment I can pay him because he's had a lot presented to him in a short amount of time. I think he's just a special guy that way.

But I think he really understands where he's from and what he's built on, and that's really held up. And it's a big reason why I think our team has been able to methodically improve that way, because what you need in these ebbs and flows of the regular season and in this environment with the social media and everything, you need to have great emotional leadership within your team, and I think we have that with him and with a lot of other players.

But certainly his personality is helpful. When he addresses or confronts adversity, his response is to go back to the lab, so to speak, and keep working on it. I'd expect him to keep repeating that.

**Q. He just turned 26, and he's kind of hitting that prime stretch of career. Off the court we know what an influence he is, but on the court, you talk about going to the top of the slide and starting over. What is his on-court ability? How does that sort of bring you guys maybe --**

SAM PRESTI: Sure. Well, I think it was two years ago or maybe -- I think it was two years ago I got asked, what can he add to the game? I said, he's going to be a two-way player. That's the thing. I don't remember how I said it, but I was like, he can't just have the ball and cook. You can't win -- that's just not a formula to win.

He's become a two-way player. The defense is something that's -- that's an additive strength for us.

I think one of the things with him is just reducing the degree of difficulty, making it a little bit easier on him, especially during the regular season, and that comes with experience a little bit and then things, ways we can -- I think the play style stuff is important to that, too, just because it's a long year. Teams are going to be really physical with us and with him.

I think his efficiency can scale. I think he gets the same stuff. But the better we are at making the game easier not just for him but for everybody will really help him, and that's like a journey that I've been very fortunate to see a lot of these guys go through this. They get better when it gets simpler.

The funny thing about it is sometimes simple is really hard to do, but it also doesn't hurt as much. So you think, geez,

is it really the right way, because isn't it supposed to be, like, a bigger lift? That's when you know someone is really good is when they can stay efficient but it doesn't look that hard. The more we can help him do that, I think the better, and that's just part of maturation.

**Q. You talked about civic pride and how important the Thunder is to this city and how people come up to you and talk to you about the team and so on.**

SAM PRESTI: They'll have other comments, too.

**Q. Absolutely. I guess my question to you is you talk a lot about we and hearing outside noise, but you're the architect of it. Knowing how important this team is to the city, what is it like for you to carry the weight of the expectations of these people, given the fact that you're the architect of it and people are looking to you?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, the way I look at it, I think it's a huge privilege. I feel extremely grateful to have been here from the beginning and to have learned as much as I have about the city and the state, trying to connect the dots all the time about why this relationship with the fans and the community -- even people that aren't real Thunder fans, I think, appreciate the team in some way.

To me, that's a big privilege. I don't really look at it like a burden in any way. It's given me the opportunity to work with an unbelievable array of people since I've been here, and I've learned so much from them.

I wouldn't look at it that way. I look at it like it's a tremendous privilege to be able to do it.

Eventually someone else is going to be the person that's doing it, and for me, I just -- while I'm serving the position, I think I've said this in the past, it's not my job, it's the Thunder's job. I'm just serving the position the best that I can and hopefully doing a good job with it for as many people as possible, and I enjoy it.

**Q. I want to get back to Shai. I think you've described it before as taking pride and taking ownership of a locker room, something along those lines. Have you seen examples of that this summer or over the past year specifically?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I just think at the camp, for instance, there's a lot of the guys that were up there to support the camp. In case you haven't heard, it is in Canada. It's a hike.

So just having people up there, being in touch with his

teammates, I think it's a steadiness, personally. I think Mark, Shai, I think those guys having been together -- and as I said earlier, during some difficult periods, just having to work through different things, I think that helps stabilize the group.

I think I said at the open, we lean on internal standards, not external conversation, and I think those standards were set in place, a lot of them in 2008, but certainly when we began this process and Mark became the head coach, those things were, I guess, kind of like reestablished in his own way, and I think with Shai and Lu, and the other players that were here during that period of time.

I would never discount the players that were on the teams during those tough years. Those guys carried a lot of water and chopped a lot of wood trying to put the system in place, stay true to that, continued to create a great environment for development. And all the different people that integrate in order to help our environment with our players, all those people have been really integral.

But Shai's demeanor I think really helps that, and his commitment to the team, his commitment to the organization is extremely, extremely valuable.

**Q. The city just hired a design consultant for the new arena. I'm just wondering, what role are you and the organization playing or plan to play as far as the design and some of the specifics?**

SAM PRESTI: Sure. When it comes to, like, arena, arena announcements, that's the city manager, the mayor. I've got to leave that to them.

I would only add that our city and our organization have worked extremely well together for a long time, not just for what's going to take place now. But certainly that relationship is very special and one of the reasons why some of the things have been able to happen the way that they've happened.

I think not just speaking from the Thunder's point of view but just for me personally, I think it's a tremendous opportunity for the community because the building that we're going to build is not necessarily going to be for the people that are using it just today, but generations and generations and generations of young people are going to -- this is going to be the place in which they go to watch and get entertained, and in a lot of ways, with competition, learn.

That exposure to any level of high performance, whether it's a concert or it's an athletic event, whatever it might be, that's just a great resource to have in your community, and





what that says, what the building itself expresses and what it stands for I think is a tremendously impactful opportunity for the future of the city, and the city and the team and all the people that will input on that have a tremendous opportunity to influence the future that way.

**Q. Fans tend to get enamored offensively with any team. I'm curious on the defensive side of the ball, adding the pedigree you did in Caruso, Hartenstein is strong there, to a really good defensive team a year ago, what possibilities do you see on that side of the ball?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I think there's a lot of ways that we can be hard to play against. I think that for us, that's one of the things that we always have to be interrogating ourselves about. It's like, are we hard to play against? Are we easy to play against in certain situations? Are we difficult to play against?

I think defensively we have the opportunity to put some things out on the court that should be really hard to play against defensively just individually, but just like we've talked about being in rhythm offensively, the team has to be in rhythm defensively, too, and in sync and on time. That takes a little time.

But you have people that can process the game defensively, I think, at a pretty high level.

When people talk about our individual defenders, sometimes they don't even talk about some guys that are pretty good defenders. But you've got to break it all down and build it up again and have the type of habits that can sustain during a lot of different conditions.

The other thing in thinking about, just like these individual pieces or players is not just seeing them as individuals, but how they can compound or how they can generate even more value when put with somebody else.

What kind of got me thinking about that was Ben Franklin was a writer, a publisher, and he was the printing press. Each one of those things amplified the other skill he had. So it actually made me think about these defenders. It's like, well, individually Caruso is really good, but if he was put with somebody like Chet, now, how much better does that make Caruso?

Now, if Chet was put with somebody like Caruso, and on down the line, now you say, okay, well, Dort, Wallace together last year, those guys can compound -- you know what I mean?

I think that's the thing about teams is it's not just the

individual players that you see in isolation, but how do their abilities compound with one another to be able to get not just, like, the additive thing but the spillover from these other things it allows you to do, and I think defensively we have the opportunity to have a lot of compounding talent that can make it very hard for us to play against.

That's how I would look at the selecting of the team, in that way, is not just the individual players, but how do their abilities leverage off of one another.

**Q. You said at the end of the season that you need to reevaluate the idea of mid-season trades. Based on this team's age and play style, do you anticipate being open to the possibility of mid-season additions, or do you think it's unlikely based on what you've learned?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I'm not going to violate my rule of, like, got to stay open. But I do think that we did -- like I said last year, we learned that it's a different team to join mid-year for sure. Partly play style, partly the development of our players, because the team is so young, that the team is changing every five to ten games.

So it's a bit of a -- like a living, moving organism, so it's hard to just jam somebody in there, especially depending on where they're coming from and their experience, all those things. You can't take that lightly.

But I also think we made two pretty big additions, and it's going to take us, as I said before, time to kind of turn every page on those, and we've lost continuity there, and that will probably show up early.

I don't think it's going to be an issue for us because I think if we can keep the group playing together enough, we'll be good by the end of the year and have that kind of continuity that we would want to have at least in year one.

I wouldn't say that we're just, like, we're going to jump at slapping on another player, especially mid-season.

I think the other thing about that is we've got to be careful about seeing every road bump or regression as an opportunity to hit the trade builder. I think external solutions always bring with them a lot of risk to the existing team that you have.

I don't think anyone really takes that into the calculus because there's such a bias for action all the time. But if you can understand your own team enough to find internal options and solutions -- those could be schematic, those could be lineup adjustments, those could be rotation adjustments, those could be personnel changes in terms of rotation or player development or planning for development

essentially -- so that you're not moving things out at the expense of the existing team, I think that's a little more nuanced way of looking at it.

That's why I think when people -- everyone tends to, when there's a team that's in regression or plateau period or whatever you want to call it, the default is, like, hit the trade builder, because to really have a very nuanced conversation about the other things, the internal things, I think that gets a little hard for people, because there's a lot more gray area there and probably a little more -- like a little more expertise on that, to be speaking that language, rather than hit the builder and flip people in and out.

But every time you do that, you're adding risk to your existing team.

I think getting better at -- not that we're not, but I think we have to look down the line and go, we're always going to have to see if there's alternatives internally first. There are usually things to try. But ultimately you're going to have to do some things externally, and we ultimately decided to do that this summer.

But I don't think we can get in the habit of continuing to do that because I think it's going to lead us further and further away from what everyone really wants.

**Q. Work ethic seems to be a common denominator of the players that come here. Talking about anecdotes of players or groups, anything from this summer stand out to you in terms of the work ethic of the guys or any individuals that you've been able to observe?**

SAM PRESTI: Man, it's hard because it's a lot. I'm always going to be forgetting somebody, and I don't want to do that.

I wouldn't say work ethic, but I will just say, I just think J-Will is a special guy. When he's playing in our open gyms or when he just walks in the room, he's just a different guy. He's a guy, I think, no matter what team he's on, he's going to help that team win a little more than they otherwise would. That's just because of his approach to the game, his competitive spirit, his selflessness. He's a special guy that way.

I'm kind of interested to see kind of how the season unfolds for him because of course he, like a lot of other guys, have had good summers. But he just does things that helps the team on the floor, and obviously off, as well.

But he's done a nice job.

**Q. (Indiscernible) in the building for the time with the**

**Blue but now having him back and Hartenstein, what have you come to know about these guys that maybe you didn't before, now that they're around and you're able to be in their presence?**

SAM PRESTI: I'm still truly getting to know them personally, and I try not to rush that too much. I would say that I haven't seen anything that was unexpected to this point. Very serious professionals, very diligent in how they prepare, really focused on learning and understanding how we're doing it. They've been really, really good.

I think one of the things that's important with this, and this is one of the great things about having so many former players on staff for us is I talk to Nick, I talk to Nazr, D.J. and Acie, because I obviously work most closely with them. Eric and Mike Wilks weren't around when I was having conversations with those guys.

But people always talk about how hard it is to integrate players on the court, but the thing I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing was, like, what are the challenges to continuity? Because I think it was around the continuity rabbit hole I was going down. But what are the challenges to a player assimilating, like, in general?

So just, look, these guys were great, and they were talking about, well, one, you're moving; you're getting adjusted; there's a family dynamic to it; you're learning where everything is; you're learning new teammates. These guys haven't been to the airport, they haven't been to the arena yet. There's certain things -- their personal acclimation. I don't think you can take any of these things for granted.

There are some people that think that the players sleep at the arena and they just play there all day and the food is brought in. But they have to live a life, and they have other things going on.

Seeing the whole person I think is something that we've always tried to work on, and when I talked about off-court continuity, that's part of it. People getting comfortable with their surroundings and meeting new people and you have a new staff for this or a new staff for this. We want to try to make that transition as good as possible, and I don't think that comes down to, like, how fluffy the pancakes are or if there's a car wash or any of this kind of -- we'll call it, like, sizzle stuff. I don't think that stuff really matters.

I think it's there's a human dynamic to pro sports, and we have to be sensitive to that, even if these are experienced players.

In some ways, Dillon Jones, Topic and Ajay could have an easier transition because they don't have to unload

everything they've learned and relearn it. There's a phrase I heard recently, like, decode to load. You have to decode your own existing habits and ways of doing it, and sometimes we've got a lot in there, it's harder to do that.

The one thing about the two guys we're talking about is their intentions are absolutely 100 percent in the right places, and it just takes time because you're in a different place and you've got to get comfortable.

**Q. Can you talk about the adjustment it is for a young team specifically to go from the hunters to a hunted team?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I don't think it'll be a big adjustment for us because we've never categorized ourselves as a hunter or being hunted. We've always just kind of seen ourselves as a work in progress, measuring ourselves against our own abilities and capabilities at that present time. I hope that doesn't change because if we need, like, external motivation to just do what we do, then I think we're not -- I don't think we're doing it right.

I hope we can kind of just be who we are but in a different environment. We're not unaware that there's going to be a lot of external conversation, external expectations on the team. That's good. That means people have a healthy respect for the team and the players. That's all positive.

But at the end of the day, the word "expectations" is built on the word "expect," as in, like, given, or it's like you start on third base, like I said earlier. That's not realistic. That's why we kind of look at possibilities, because they certainly could unfold that way.

But the only way that's going to happen is if you have a real healthy and humble respect for how hard it is to win, that there's going to be an array of unforeseen circumstances that we can never expect, and we have to be able to navigate those with the internal standards that we've had in place for several years now.

Even last year, we had like four or five seasons in one, if you think about it. We started last year, we were sitting here, and I think the external expectation was, can they get back to the play-in, because we were really, really young. We had a big jump the year before. Seemed reasonable that that would be, like -- I don't think anybody thought that was out of whack.

Then we started to play well, and it became clear that we probably were going to make the play-in. So then the expectations became mid-season, well, can they make the Playoffs, though? As we went along, it became clear, I think they might make the Playoffs, like one of the top six

spots. Then it changed to, but can they get a home seed -- no, can they get a top four?

So we're into season three. Can they do this? Well, looks like they're going to do that. By the end, it was can they be the No. 1 seed in the conference? That's all within 82 games. Nothing wrong with that. That's how it works.

But I think it's just a good example of this term "expected." No one knows what to expect. I just think it's possible, but it's also possible that we could have won 30 games last year if health didn't go the way that we hoped it would or we had regression in some ways or guys' development curves didn't go quite the way they were.

It doesn't mean it can't happen, but it also doesn't mean it should happen.

**Q. Between Lu and Alex, you have two of the best defenders in the entire NBA at the guard position. I wanted to ask if there's any common threads between those two guys along with Cason, and how much do you think it helps Cason developmentally to have those two guys in the building?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I don't know that -- I want to be around Alex more. I don't want to give you, like, some platitude answer because I don't do that. Same thing, like I learned -- Chris Paul is maybe -- I've had this happen to me all the time since I've been doing this, but Chris Paul is the loudest one to me. I always knew Chris Paul was a good player because he's a good player. The optics are such.

But when you get around the guys and you can see the craftsmanship, the nuance, that's when I think you have a better understanding as to, like, that's how it's happening. That's the way that the bread is being baked.

I'm not there with Alex yet. I'm excited. I'm really genuinely excited to see him, because I like to see anybody that's really good at something do it. I like to hear him talk about it. I like to watch him. It doesn't matter, anything. Could be a painter, if -- if somebody is really good at something, I want to know, why are they good at it?

I'm excited to watch Caruso's process and how that works. Truly interested in that. But I couldn't tell you the similarities.

I know with Lu. Lu is a heartbeat of a team in a lot of ways because of his approach and his consistency, his physicality, his determination. He's about the team. He's come from nowhere, like undrafted. He's just got a great

disposition to him.

So I see his day-to-day thing, but I couldn't compare them, and I'm sure they won't be the same.

As far as Wallace goes, I wouldn't limit it to him. I think just having -- with Caruso, I just think, and Dort, their approaches, they do the same thing, but they may do it different. So I think just having different approaches to getting the same thing done, like I said before, I hate to be -- sounds like I'm trying too hard, but the Ben Franklin thing I think is real. The fact that these two guys can kind of amplify one another, they make each other better by almost being good at the same thing but doing it differently.

I think that has some spillage onto a guy like Cason, who is a pretty good player in his own right. If we were a different team and didn't have as many young players, if we were a team that was much older on the age spectrum and he was our only young prospect, I think people would view him differently.

But fortunately for us, he's one of a few different players that are still in the very, very early stages of their career, with Chet, Dub, who we haven't talked about, and on down the line. Wallace is a guy we're really excited about. He's got a lot of the same characteristics that these other guys have but doesn't have the reps yet. But he's getting them. He's getting them. He played a lot for a first-year player and played in big moments.

So exposure to those moments is a big deal, and I think the same thing for Chet and Dub, just getting the exposure we got to the postseason is going to accelerate us.

The other thing that accelerates us in my opinion is playing in the West. I'm not so sure that we would be a team of our current caliber if we didn't play in the Western Conference because it is very hard because the quality of the teams is so good, but I think the mere fact that we have to play in the West every single night has accelerated our development curve, and we haven't -- like I said before, no one is throwing the doors open for the Thunder no matter what. They're not throwing rose petals at our feet and trying to make it easier.

But the Western Conference I think sharpens the blade in a way that's very unique. I think it may have helped us make some of these jumps. So when people go from how do you go from 16 -- whatever it is, make a 16-game jump and then another jump the next year, the answer is a lot of good fortune and hard work from the players and the coaches.

But I think the other part about it is if we could go back and

look when it's all said and done, I think it might be having to play in the Western Conference every night.

**Q. I'm sure you've seen or heard about the videos of Isaiah out there, open gym, and that's not the NBA, but people did see some things they really hadn't seen him do in a game. Any indication that we'll see more of his game here than we have at other spots, or does that mean anything at all?**

SAM PRESTI: So, I wouldn't limit anything in terms of what we could see or whatnot because I haven't seen it. You know what I'm saying? But the thing about Hartenstein, and we're going to have to figure out the Isaiah thing because we had the Dub thing and Jaylin thing and we kind of have an Isaiah issue. So I'll leave that up to you guys.

But in terms of Isaiah, if Isaiah was 6'7" or 6'8", we'd still want him on the team. So it's not like this guy happens to be a 5. He's a good basketball player for how we want to play basketball.

There are certain things about how he processes the game, defensively and offensively he's comfortable with the ball in his hands, and he's a guy that can keep possessions moving. He's physical. These are things that I could say about a lot of the other players on the team. He just happens to be big. He adds some other entities, as well, but he'd be someone we would want if he was 6'5".

I think we need to turn every page, to use Caro again. We have to see. In order to see that, it'll take time. I don't know if we'll have the ability to do that. But we have to, as I said before, be curious about that.

I would like to think one of the things we've tried to do over time is see people and players for what they can be and not for what they are currently. With him, I think there's some things that we can maybe leverage, specifically because of the play style and some of the people that we might have around him that he can work with a little bit in terms of his teammates and how his game can leverage up or compound off one another.

But that remains to be seen, and I don't think we can just expect it or assume that it's going to happen that way.

**Q. You talked about watching the city grow. I don't know if you imagined in 2008 that 20 years later, this is going to be a city that hosts two Olympic events. I just wanted to know, as somebody who's invested his time and watched it grow, what that means to you?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I'm a citizen like everyone else, and I



... when all is said, we're done.®

take a lot of pride any time the city is moving in a positive direction or there's progression in different ways.

I do think that one thing that is important, and we can't lose sight of in not just our city but in general, is competition. Sports are such a great thing, I think especially for young people competing for things, knowing that there's a chance to win or there's a chance to lose, and that you have to show up, you have to prepare. Competition is not something to be feared.

I think the more sports and the more ways we can honor competition and the history of competition in the state I think is awesome.

Every time I drive downtown and I see those statues, the Mantle statue, Warren Spahn, Johnny Bench, those guys are from here, the competitors. I think that is really awesome.

I think the more we can elevate competition as something that helps you get better and isn't just a pass/fail experience, I think that's great for future generations.

Sometimes I worry that we're losing some of that. The more we can lift that up -- maybe that's something the new arena can help us do in the community is honor the history of competition, but also the future of what that means for Oklahoma, as well.

At the end of the day, a lot of life is, like, how hard you can get hit and not stop moving forward, and that's competing. That's competing.

I think the more we have that kind of durability and resiliency in our community with our young people, the better.

**Q. What are your thoughts on not getting a Christmas Day game?**

SAM PRESTI: I have a few on that. I think at the end of the day -- the first thing to remember is I don't think it's like a personal issue because we've played on Christmas nine times. We've only been here for 16 seasons. So we've been playing on Christmas more than we haven't.

We also have been, I think it's top 5 in Christmas Day games since we've been here, 2008. I don't think there's another small market team that's played on Christmas more than we have. I could be wrong. If I am, I'm sure you guys will remind me about that, but you'll have to wait until the end of the year.

So I don't think it's that. I think there is a little bit of

Hanlon's razor in there, and I think that -- and I say that to not be on opening night and not be on Christmas Day, have the second leading MVP vote getter and also the No. 1 seed. Sure.

But I also kind of like it because I think whoever is making those decisions, whether it's -- I think it's probably the league, I think they're kind of looking more at the age and saying, well, this is too young. Maybe they don't think we're this or we're that.

I like that challenge, like I said before. I'm not going to sit up here and say -- we don't expect things to be given to us and then complain about not being on Christmas Day. We have to earn it. We have to show that we're a team that's capable of that type of recognition, I guess.

I think there's a lot of other teams that had the things that we had, like I mentioned, the second MVP vote getter that played, but in this case, that wasn't the case. You can't play all 30 teams. I don't think it's personal because we wouldn't have played as many times in the past. We've got to go out there and show them that we're capable, and hopefully we can do that.

**Q. What does the next step for Dub look like?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, that one could go a lot of ways because he's a very versatile player. I mean, the best thing for me with him is the motor, maintaining that level of competitiveness and the ability to tee it up night in and night out on both ends of the floor, even as the game gets easier for him offensively.

Same thing, as I said, with Shai. Degree of difficulty is -- we want that low and efficiency high, and he's very capable of doing that.

He's going to be counted on more to be able to create the rhythm for the team a little bit offensively. He's definitely capable of doing that.

I think we have to be pragmatic about the fact that Chet, Dub, they're extremely talented players, but they're on a path. They're on a journey. There could be some regression here at some point. When that happens, if that happens, I think they'll pound through that.

But it may not just unfold perfectly, but it's a great example of some things you've got to work through and some things you've got to work around.

With Dub, there could be some times where he struggles in one way or the other. We've got to work through that. He's too important to the team. Chet might have some

situations where he might not be getting great return on that possession for whatever reason one way or the other. Can't work around that. Got to work through that. Might have to take some short-term pain to get the benefits down the line with both of those players.

So I wouldn't read too much into their personal trajectory this particular season. I know by the end of the year, both of those players will be better players. There's no question about it.

But we've been here all long enough to know, we've seen a lot of young players go through peaks and valleys, ebbs and flows. I look at it as growth and repair. Both of those guys, there will be a lot of growth and repair.

**Q. Obviously Alex is extension eligible in December. I wondered your thought process there on him long-term.**

SAM PRESTI: Well, we can't have that conversation until December. When we can, we will.

I think it's clear that he fits a lot of the characteristics and the criteria that we value. Having had him here starting with the Blue, every time I say that, we're also admitting that we completely fumbled the ball on that, but we also did identify him, but we weren't smart enough to keep him. (Laughter).

But we know him to a degree, the early stage. We know, I think, enough to want to have him here for a really long time based on his performance at his different stops but the human that we know from having been around him in the short time that he was here.

But we have to wait and see where that leads us when we get to that period of time.

**Q. With respect to the hurdles to come, just here in preseason before you start, just looking at your roster, how much do you like your roster? Is it the best roster you've ever had going into a season?**

SAM PRESTI: I like the collection of guys that we have. I don't think compare -- I don't really like to compare the teams because you lose all the context of that point in time. We could go back and the team -- we could look at a team, and we could look at it now and be like, well -- it's a great example of we look at the end. We think about the player, the most recent vision of the player, and some of these guys are retired now, so you're like, that guy is not very good. Yeah, because he's 10 years away from his prime and he's not playing basketball anymore.

But at that point in time, those guys were driving 55 to 60-win teams. So it's hard for me to say -- to know each one of them. That's why I was saying in the beginning, we don't know what this season is going to hold or how it'll be remembered because the only way to understand it is to see it in the catalog of all the other teams that we've had.

I'm sure we've come into different seasons when we were in that first mountain where we felt really good and were validated by the fact that we'd win, go to the Western Conference Finals four out of six years, and the two years we didn't do during that stretch we had monster injuries, so those teams are to be pretty good.

I don't know how this team will perform. I do think there's a difference between building, picking players and selecting a team. I like the way the team has been selected. I feel good about that, and I feel good about the selection of some of these other teams that we had in the past.

I think people will take that and try to twist that into, like, the pieces didn't fit or something like that. They fit pretty good. We have top 5 offenses and top 5 defenses from those years in multiple years, so they weren't disjointed. We just never got over the hump to get the final thing, but that's part of sports. That's part of competition.

I'm not embarrassed to say we didn't get it done. I'm proud to say that we were in the arena, we were in the fight every year. We just got beat sometimes by circumstances and a lot of times just by better teams.

But we'll see where this team can go.

Sometimes the joke I have with people about that is sometimes -- we'll never know the team I thought we would have going into '16-'17 when we added Sabonis and Ilyasova, I thought that team was going to be pretty good, hard to beat. It had some momentum behind it, too.

But you never know. You never know. The external expectations question from the beginning of the press conference, the year that we won 50 games with -- or we had a 50-win pace before COVID with CP, a young Shai, Schroder, Adams, no one could have expected that team to win at that clip. We almost had a home seed if we kept playing -- I think we were playing for the fourth seed the night the season got shut down.

I've done this long enough to say I don't have any idea how it's going to unfold. I do think that I like the compounding nature of the players we have, though. I think that's good.

But it's going to need time. I'm pretty confident about that. We're going to need time to play together, to learn

together, to build up the synchronicity you need to be a really, really high-level team, and we can't underestimate the age because it's a huge advantage to us in a lot of ways.

But I always talk about the silent forces that exist in the NBA. Those are always things you're going to have to battle with any team but a young team, and this team has been exceptionally strong in this area, but it's not something you can ever take your defenses down against because it's really -- it's not intentional, it's just something that can pervade.

But our guys have been -- that's one of the most inspiring things for me about this particular group of guys, that I really, really -- they give me energy in a lot of ways because I think their intentions and ideals are really in the right places to try to win. They're ambitious but without an agenda. I really respect that for young people. That's a hard thing to do for any young person, but especially when you have the level of talent and attention some of these guys have.

It's really special, and if we can maintain that, I think we can be a very good team for a very long time.

**Q. About no agendas, when you ask fellow players about their teammates, often what they'll say is that they're an unselfish player, unselfish person. Is that something that you often identify in sort of player acquisition, or do you think there's some -- you mentioned spillage with Caruso and Dort. Do you think that's an attribute --**

SAM PRESTI: I think so, but I also don't think it's bad for people to have personal ambition as athletes and competitors. I think welcoming that into the fray is a good thing but not at the expense of the overarching goal of team performance.

But I think it's really hard to tell somebody to completely divorce themselves from wanting to be really good individually. Like that's -- we want our players to get recognized individually. That's a positive thing. It generally happens when the team is good. Sometimes it doesn't. So I would never say that we just want people that are -- would never consider anything about themselves. That's not realistic. It's not pragmatic.

But I want to try to create an environment for each one of the players where they can achieve their ultimate aspirations and become the best player they can be individually but also in a way that ladders into elite team performance. It's much more meaningful when your personal growth and development is impacting those

around you. That's why I think the best players to me in all sports, they all lift the play of their teammates.

Somewhere along the way, we shifted into how are those players helping the best players. But when I grew up it was all about you can put anyone around this guy. He's going to make him shoot better, he's going to make him be better. To me that's what the great guys do is they can lift the team but they can also themselves demonstrate their own personal greatness or excellence. I don't think that's anything to try to stifle.

But if it gets in the way, then we're getting further away from what we all want.

**Q. At some point last season Shai was just talking about how he sees the big picture so well, and he was saying that he's watched a lot of basketball and he pays attention to history. I wonder what you sense history and legacy and maybe specifically legacy here means to him?**

SAM PRESTI: I don't know. You know, I don't want to answer that question for him. What I can say is that the guys here that leave it on the floor and are true warriors, they really do get honored in the history of this organization.

Part of it is because we're still so young. 80 percent of the NBA has taken place without the Thunder. We're still grinding and trying to create the identity for the franchise. I know that sounds -- it's probably silly to some people, but the cement is not dry necessarily on our organization at all.

The people that are here in the early stages -- and we're still in the early stages relative to how these things usually go when you look at the history of these franchises, these institutions in the NBA -- the impact that people can have is really significant. Even if you're here for a short amount of time, people will remember you here.

Look, we have Jeremy Lamb who's in town today to do an appearance at an event for the team. Like people know who Jeremy Lamb is. He played on a 60-win team. He helped us win some big games. He grew a ton as a player while he was here. He played on really good teams here.

Because we're so short on tenure, each one of these guys can leave an impact in their own way, and I think that's a great thing.

I try to explain that to them as much as I can while they're here, because the contributions here, I think they cut a little bit deeper because we don't have as much immediate history.

**Q. Who was your favorite player growing up, and what books did you read this summer?**

SAM PRESTI: You're standing in the back, so you're tired, so you're throwing it out there. You want to end this.

My favorite players? They always moved around. I had favorite baseball players, I had favorite football players. I loved Barry Sanders. I loved Tim Raines. I loved Randall Cunningham. I loved Griffey, the son. I loved those guys. I loved Wade Boggs.

Basketball-wise, I don't know. The thing I liked the most -- because now the game is so easy to get. It's so easy to get. Like it just splashes you in the face all the time. I had to stay up until 10:30 at night to watch Run DMC for me, and I loved that team. I could go on and on about -- I loved Rodman because I loved the competitor, their relentlessness, just the underdog part of him.

I don't know. I could bore you. No one cares about this. (Laughter).

So the books you probably don't care about either. But I read -- or I am reading "If I Live to Be 100." It's about a series of interviews with centenarians, and the fascinating thing about this is I think the author is actually becoming the main subject because they're being so influenced by that.

I read a great book on Lee Allan Smith. If you don't know who Lee Allan Smith is, he's a legendary Oklahoma citizen and really maybe the most prideful and passionate Oklahoman I have come in contact with. He really is at the heart of bringing -- this is a man that brought Doc Severinson, Bob Hope, he was friends with Curt Gowdy. This guy has lived a life. Just the most generous person maybe I've ever met in my life. He has a biography, and it's an amazing story.

Let's see, what else. Doris Kearns Goodwin has a new book out about her relationship with her husband Dick Goodwin, which is really good. Then the book I'd like to get, which I don't think is available yet, is a book called "What You Give Away, You Keep Forever." It's by Dr. Tom Farrell. It is not available, but I am looking to getting that, and if anyone knows how to get that, I'd like to get it.

But that's it. Those are the main things.

Thank you, guys. Appreciate it very much.

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