

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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General Manager Sam Presti

Press Conference



SAM PRESTI: All right, thanks everybody for joining us. Just have a few thank yous I want to go through before we begin to talk about the year and then answer questions that you guys might have.

First I just want to make sure that I acknowledge and thank our ownership group, led by Clay. We have a tremendous group of people that own this team, and it's a great example for all of us on how to operate as a team.

There is a tremendous selflessness to these individuals. There is no egos. They've really been a key to the success that we've been able to have over the last 17 years and a big part of it is just their ability to operate together. We don't take that for granted.

I also want to thank our fans clearly. They've been fantastic for us over the last two months, people that have been waiting for us when we've gotten back late at night at the airport, people that are standing and applauding the efforts of our players continuously. Obviously the support at the parade was just -- you can't really put that into words.

We're super grateful for just how committed they've been, not just this season but all the seasons prior.

I also want to acknowledge our staff, the amount of people that work behind the scenes in order for us to put a basketball team on the floor every single day. That could be the chefs that are preparing the food. That could be people that are washing the uniforms, sweeping the floors, people in data and analytics that are running a million algorithms that may or may not ever be used, people with the Blue that are treating the players that we don't even have draft rights to or are under contract, just like they're Shai or Dub or Chet. That's a huge part of our organization, and I want to make sure I acknowledge all the work that goes in behind the scenes, and specifically this year.

I really want to recognize our medical and performance teams. This year was extremely challenging from that point of view. I think we only had our full roster eight and a half percent of the games that we played, and it's very rare that you have players playing more minutes together in the Playoffs than they have the entire regular season.

Donnie Strack and Andrew Paul specifically have really just shown great skill in managing us through the year and getting ourselves to a point where we had great availability at the end of the year and into the postseason. That was a remarkable effort by those guys and their teams.

We always kind of talk about our seasons here in chapters, kind of in a larger catalog. I think I said on many occasions that basketball is best enjoyed on a year to year basis, but I think it's best appreciated over the course of time, when you can look back and see how each season was bookended in one way or the other.

Obviously, chapter 17 is going to be remembered forever because of how unique it was but also kind of how it unfolded. In my opinion, the 17th chapter is the culmination of all of the others that had come before it.

The foundation for so many of the things that we were fortunate enough to experience this year were the result of a lot of people that aren't even here right now, that have been a part of the organization and have given their contributions.

Then this particular team took those and made them their own. They evolved our organization. They evolved our process, and they are the ones that ultimately made the 17th year a really special one.

It's well-documented that when we arrived in 2008, we didn't have a team name. We didn't have a logo. We had no place to practice. Everybody has heard that before. But what we did have immediately was a connection to the community that we represent, and that is something that hasn't changed since we've arrived here.

But the city itself and the state itself are the reasons why we exist. They're the reasons why we're here. The ultimate rebuilding job was done by the city leadership many, many years ago. That's Mayor Norick and Mayor Cornett. They're the people that allowed the city to recover



from 1995 and the tragedy that occurred here, and put in place the vision for the city to be able to have an NBA team one day in the future.

We have to recognize that that's the reason that we're here.

Obviously, we also finished the year winning our last game. It's very rare that that can happen. Although we won, I think the thing that the city and the team really have more than anything is they have a true team, not just a winning team.

That team is built on deep relationships, an appreciation for differences and idiosyncrasies. All of our guys are much different people. They might not even be hanging out together if it weren't for the fact that they play and have a common goal together.

We have people from Canada, Serbia, the West Coast, the East Coast, middle America, France, Australia, that all come together for a collective goal. There's compassion on the team. There's a cowboy toughness, a self-reliance that comes from being homegrown, and an essential sense of goodness.

If that sounds familiar, that's because those are the same things that have been in Oklahoma for generations. I think the thing to recognize is that the team is really just a reflection of the state. I think the team itself resonates with the people here because it really is them looking at what makes living here special and unique.

It's a magnetic relationship. I've heard people say that this is a team of underdogs in an underdog state, and I do agree with the first half of that, which is that we do have some underdogs on this team, people that have been doubted, questioned, guys that have come to the NBA through very unorthodox roots and paths, and that's what makes the team unique and special.

But I don't agree with the fact that this is an underdog state in any way. I think the thing to note here, in my opinion, is that there's really nothing missing in Oklahoma. There's nothing missing here. We didn't need a trophy to validate anything whatsoever.

I think if you look closely at all of the things that make this place unique and special, the things that really matter, we're not short on any of those things. In fact, we're long on all of them.

I just want to make sure that although we won and we were the last team standing, we didn't really need that for other people to recognize all the great things that it means to be

from here or to live here.

I'm super proud of what we accomplished. I'm more proud of how we accomplished it. We grew from all the experiences we had throughout the year. Each time we'd accomplish something, the guys never really got distracted by the outcomes. They were consumed with the pursuit of progress. They were not consumed with outcomes or adulation.

I think that is a credit to their maturity and a credit to the leadership that Mark and his coaching staff demonstrated, not just this year but over the course of time.

Very much pace-setting and not clock watching, not looking at timelines or external expectations, really just turning every page.

I think teams can be attached or they can be connected, and this team was absolutely connected. The way it's connected is through the trust that the guys have developed, and in some cases over years, in some cases relatively quickly with some new additions.

But you can't confuse outcomes with trust. If we didn't win the last game, it wouldn't change all the dynamics and the qualities that I have named off about the team, and I think sometimes that gets lost when you have success. It seems to shift to the reason why is these things.

But a lot of times it's a lot of different things that are out of your control that allow that to happen.

A big reason why I think we've had the trust on the team is because of the people around our players. Their parents, could be grandparents, could be uncles, aunts, cousins, mentors, coaches, teachers. Somewhere along the way, this group of guys was having tremendous inputs about the value of winning, being a part of winning, and not taking yourself too seriously or keeping score on the other people in your life that are supposed to be helping you.

Instead, I think they've reversed a lot of that, and they think about how am I helping the other person. That comes from a great collection of people.

When we were able to win the final game, it wasn't just our players and staff, but it was really their families, because their families have really helped guide them and put them in a mindset that helped all of us achieve the goal that we were able to.

So now we've got to keep going, obviously. We have to keep going. We have to keep pressing on, and the odds are clearly stacked against us being here again next year



because I think it's been well-documented at this point, the last 10 teams that have won the championship, I think only one of them have repeated; 60 percent of them have failed to get past the second round, so that's more than half of those.

The reasons for that and why that's so hard, I mean, none of us will really ever know. Sometimes it could be just randomness. Sometimes it could be hubris. Sometimes it could just be fatigue.

Then we all know that the silent forces that we've talked about here for almost 10 years, they're knocking on your door every single day, and they knock a hell of a lot harder once you have success.

We'll have to put our head down. We're not entitled to anything. If you hear us approaching things differently than we have in the past, I'd be a little bit surprised by that. But we're going to have to fight some human nature there, but I think we have the people and the characters and the program to fight for that. But we're going to have to stack days in order to stack seasons.

All that starts with some consistent organizational fundamentals, a focus on seeing our players as people, pursuing progress by stacking days, creating environments for learning, cohesion and development and humility, realizing that we have been very, very fortunate and that the role of chance and luck throughout the year at different times favored us, and in past seasons, sometimes those things didn't favor us.

I think it's really important for us to take a step back and realize that we have to have a tremendous amount of humility for what was just accomplished and not allow anybody or anyone to feel that their contributions are not being recognized or anything that would take us off track from the mindset and the maturity that we've displayed to this point.

All of that's really for the future. Right now, what we need to do is be very present and be very grateful. Grateful for our players, grateful for their families, grateful for wonderful ownership, a committed staff, and a community that inspires us like a propulsive force.

All of those things need to be kind of absorbed in the moment. We have to have gratitude and also respect for the fact that it didn't have to unfold this way for us.

Inside these walls of the building, we never talked about external expectations. We only talked about possibilities, what was possible. It was possible that we could end up being the last team standing. It's also possible that we

could lose Chet Holmgren for 75 percent of the season, and that's why when everybody is asking about expectations before the year starts, I say, well, the expected is everything stays the same, and then you can make these very educated guesses.

But nobody was factoring into expectations that we'd only have the full roster for eight and a half percent of the games. But it's very possible that those things could happen. It's how you recover from them. It's how you view them and you frame them. It's how you press on when those things take place.

The last thing I would say is, and I heard this the other day, experiencing things properly allows you to remember them vividly. This last season should live in our hearts and minds and animate our outlook on much more than basketball in Oklahoma.

The players from this team, they will be immortalized, not because they delivered a trophy to Oklahoma but because they did so in a fashion that everyone in this state can easily relate to and understand, and that's their greatest legacy.

I have a few housekeeping notes I want to go through, then we'll get to all your questions. My guess is we're not going to be here as long as we usually are because everyone is so tired, and that's fine.

A couple things. One, Topic will play Summer League. I'm going to get asked that question.

Sorber will not play Summer League. He's still kind of in the return-to-performance phase, and the draft process doesn't really allow for great progress in that because he's traveling all over the place.

J-Dub is going to have surgery on that wrist. I want to just acknowledge for a second how impressed I am with him. The injury took place before the Playoffs began, so against Phoenix we had a back-to-back -- I cannot remember, it may have been Lakers-Phoenix. It occurred during that game.

We knew he was going to need surgery at the end of the season, and he played the two months with this injury. It's just a ligament tear. It's not an injury that he'll have any problem recovering from. It's pretty common.

But the part that I am most impressed with is in our modern era, when someone has a poor performance or they're not playing to their capability in a game and there's a lot of attention on it, you often see a little birdie make sure that everybody knows that the player is not 100 percent. Never



happened with this guy. Not one time.

He powered through. He showed incredible mental endurance and security in himself, and I've said this many times: The best players are secure players. I really thought it was pretty impressive that he just kept moving along with no excuses and obviously played his best basketball down the stretch of the season.

But he'll be undergoing surgery, and he should be available for the start of the regular season.

With that, we'll take any questions.

Q. Have you had time to reflect on the role that you and Clay have had in the growth of the city since you guys have been here?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I haven't had time to reflect on that. I don't think if I had time to think about it I would think about that. It's really for other people to determine those types of things.

I just think we've, kind of from day one, just focused on a set of principles that we felt could be consistently applied that are pulled from this particular community and tried to not deviate from those, and then whatever effect that has or however people interpret that, that's really up to them.

But I do mean what I said earlier, which is that the city leadership here really are the people that laid the foundation for the team to be here. The fact that we had a championship season doesn't really -- it shouldn't be the reason we're having to -- we're acknowledging that, the contributions of the people that started MAPS or all the other countless city initiatives.

It's great this happened for all of us to reflect on that, but even if we weren't the last team standing, it doesn't change the fact that these folks long ago could see Oklahoma City for what it could be and not just for what it was at the present time, and that to me is what vision is.

Q. You talked about pride in the this was done. You mentioned guys being homegrown several times. Most of these teams that win championships, they get splashy big name trades, they get big name coaches, things like that. You mentioned homegrown; you stuck to that plan. You did it differently than anybody has ever done it. How much pride do you take in the fact that you did it your way, very different than others?

SAM PRESTI: I don't know if "pride" is the right word because to me that's a little judgmental of the other ways

that you can do it. To me, there's kind of three ways in the league. You can assemble teams. You can inherit and modify a team. Or you can build a team. So I think there's three kind of modes: Build, modify, assemble.

How you do that or the way in which you do that, I think, is very contextual. For us, building is probably our best path here. Because of that, we don't have a lot of time to determine, well, which way should we go. The paradox of choice is not really in our vantage point. So I think that helped us, or helps us.

We kind of know what our circle of competence is, and we try to really lean into that.

But I think the way the guys have expressed that kind of in their play, the philosophies of the organization, that's been really a special thing, and Mark being able to bring that to the court itself was really unique, and that's one of the reasons why I love working with him.

Q. You mentioned how there hasn't been a team go back to back in quite some time. A lot of the players on those teams that have won in the past didn't get a chance to run it back, or a legit chance to run it back for whatever reason. How much of a factor is that for you going forward, to give these guys a chance to run it back?

SAM PRESTI: To me, we've talked for years about sustainability, and the reason why we're in the position that we were this year was because of sustainability. We put ourselves in position year in and year out. If we boiled everything down and burned the boats for one season and that season was last year, we wouldn't be in this position.

I feel like we're going to be in a position for the team to continue to grow and get better for a period of years because of the age of the team.

I also think the team will be different next year, even if we return the exact roster that we have today, because the players will improve, teams will play us differently, and there's just a natural organic nature to a team's development.

So we're not looking to try to replicate what we did last year. We're not trying to hold on too tightly to one way to win, and I think you saw that coming into this year because the year previous, I think we won 58 games with Chet at the 5. Prior to that, people thought we were crazy to play him at the 5. We won 58 games.

But then when we came back this year, we added heart. We're not married to one way of doing anything. We're



looking to try to figure out what's the best way for a given team, and I'd like to think you're going to see us continually strive for that, and it should look different.

Q. After the win, Game 7, you're up on the stage, you do an interview with TV, and there was emotion in that moment from you. We could see it, wiping your eyes and stuff. I know there's been a lot happen between then and now, but can you take us back to those moments after and what those emotions were for you?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. For me, I think there's like two things happening. One, I was just so happy for the players because they really try to do everything right. They prioritize winning, not just this year but early on, and they are extremely ambitious but they never had an agenda that pulled away from the collective team.

They went through a fair amount of adversity during the season. In reality, a lot of that adversity forged us into the team that we were, playing different lineups and being without certain players and then getting those players back, and the selflessness and humility that the players coming back had to have in order to fit into a team that was really cooking without them. Chet is one example of that, but we had many others.

So you just want to feel like that is getting rewarded.

Now, the Pacers, they could feel the exact same thing. I mean, they're an unbelievable team, an unbelievable organization. It's not like we were deserved or anything was reserved for us because our guys demonstrated a maturity well beyond their years, but I really wanted them to be rewarded for that and to see that we were fortunate enough for that to happen to us. That was emotional.

Then I think the other part of it was like -- I think just about everybody on the stage there, you have an inner life that you're experiencing during the Playoffs and when you get to these moments like a Game 7, and for me the biggest thing is I'm so grateful for so many people in my life along the way. I would never have been in that situation without so many people from when I was a very, very young age.

So a lot of that was me thinking, what if this teacher didn't put their arm around me or what if this coach didn't correct me or what if this friend didn't serve as a mentor or a rock or I didn't end up in San Antonio or I didn't -- for me, I have a pretty good understanding of where I fit in all this.

Like I was a Division III player; I really shouldn't be here. Every day I'm kind of, like, how did this happen? So I think that's a big part of me is like this inner life experience. I think everyone is going through that, but I asked everyone

in the organization before we got on the parade route, I gathered everybody and I just said, look, have the time of your life today. This is so rare.

But after it's over, like, call somebody that had an influence on you that nudged you, pushed you, held you accountable. We all landed in this place at this time. No one knows exactly why, but it wouldn't be that way if it weren't for somebody or a lot of people in your life that made that possible.

I just think that that level of gratitude and reflection is important, and that's what I mean when we were talking, I was saying things that are experienced, like, very, very fondly and presently become very vivid for you. I think not just being euphoric, but at some level looking back and being grateful is really important.

Q. I was going to ask you who you might have heard from since the championship, but what you just said makes me think, who have you reached out to say thank you?

SAM PRESTI: The weird thing about it is I'm pretty good on that. I mean, teachers -- a lot of teachers from when I was little, high school teammates. I had high school teammates come down. My college teammates were in Indiana. Some very influential people in my life were very present through this.

The odd thing is that you kind of have, like, a rotation with these people that you're constantly in communication with, and you're talking to them in a bit of a cycle. But when you're having an experience like this, everybody is there at the same time. So it kind of makes you feel like you're 12 years old again because it's like these people become a part of your life in unison.

That's very special to me.

Yeah, these people weren't hearing from me for the first time. I'm just grateful because they could -- to be able to share that with some of those people is a pretty cool thing because they know me, and they know I shouldn't be here, either. They think we're getting over on everybody (laughter), and we probably are.

Q. How much does this affect your future? And an accomplishment this great, does it make you think about doing something else, whether outside basketball or --

SAM PRESTI: It's just not where my mind goes. I really -- for me, the fact that we accomplished something as a group of people, to me that is an incredible



accomplishment, but I've never looked at that as a signal of any kind.

It's easy to say that now, but those of you that have been around me for 17 years, I think you probably know, I'm always focused on the quality of the work. I have a lot of respect for the role of luck and chance and how that plays such a huge factor in all of our lives, professionally and personally.

We were fortunate in a lot of ways this year. So I wouldn't look at it as like this is some threshold personally, and I'm not trying to diminish what it means for the city and for the team and for the organization and everybody involved. But for me personally, it's just being in it with everybody and consistently trying to make good decisions.

But I'm not looking at it on a personal level. I like what I do and I'm inspired by what I do. If I was only motivated by just being able to say that this one thing happened, I think I'd be empty right now. But I'm not empty at all. I feel inspired by watching the people that literally I've watched them grow up, J-Will or Wiggs or Isaiah Joe, Kenrich, some of these guys that came through the program, that inspires me. That fills me.

If it was just like, well, we have to do this and then everybody will say X, I think I'd feel pretty empty right now. And I don't feel that way. I feel, like, inspired about what these guys have accomplished.

Q. Did you hear from anybody? I think about the guys and people who have come through here over the 17 years.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, and that's a special thing, I think, about this being the first championship that the organization has won. You can only win the first one one time, and that's why I was saying earlier that it's year 17, but the 16 years leading up to this, I think a lot of people feel a part of it.

From tons of former players, some that were here for a year and some that were here for many, many years, former coaches, people that were sweeping the floors previously, people that were in the video room. Just so many people.

I had one person say, and I thought this was really well-said, I'm not going to get a ring, but I'm a part of the banner, and I really -- that's what you want people to feel when they are a part of your program.

Those people 100 percent are. Credit to our current players and their maturity; they welcome those people.

When Wiggins recognized Nick the other night, what a sign of maturity and emotional IQ and selflessness. That really moved me.

For me personally, going through this last two months with Nazr Muhammad, Nick Collison, DJ White, Eric Maynor, Mike Wilks, guys that played here. You know, sitting in a room after Game 6 in Indiana with Nick Collison, Nazr Muhammad, just that experience, I'll never forget that.

That's really meaningful to me. But it's all these different people. I can't go through all of them, but we had a lot of them feel a part of it, and that is extremely meaningful.

Q. A guy that was with a bunch of the guys you just named was also in the building throughout the Playoffs in Kendrick Perkins. I wonder what you thought of his reception in the building and having him there for all of this?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it's like when you look back on the experience that we had, I mean, Perk really is a unique figure in our history because he changed a lot of things when he got here. I think he won like 75 percent of the games he played in here, which is an astounding stat. He did have some pretty good teammates during those games (laughter), but he was -- I think he helped us go from a fun team to a contending team.

He's a special guy.

The other thing is Perk from the first day he got here, he just raised the basketball acumen in the building in a way that was, like, really significant. He helped change the program 100 percent, so I'm so happy that he got recognized for that.

You saw that throughout the year when different guys would come back and people are recognized, and again, it's because we're still in the first 20 years of our history, and so we're still -- the cement is not dry on this yet in terms of what it all will mean when we look back.

But those guys should be recognized. Chris Paul is another guy. He's obviously a factor not just in our history but just basketball in Oklahoma because he was here with the New Orleans team.

It's great that our fans can see and connect all these dots to the different individuals. We obviously played Russell in the Playoffs, and for him to be in the building in these situations, it just -- you just have to look back on it and take it all in.

Q. We obviously heard from the players about what

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

they thought of this, but how did it sit with you, the narratives of this team, how this team was talked about throughout the year?

SAM PRESTI: The way I would look at that, or did look at it, is I could understand why people were saying that, right. I think normally in a current world, anytime people doubt you or question you or whatever, you see this, like, retort of disrespect. Know what I mean? That never kind of came from our organization or from our players, most importantly.

We didn't get a Christmas game, and we just said, okay, well, we'll have to earn that. It wasn't like, oh, they're treating us bad or -- we just said we have to earn that. Maybe we'll get that in the future. Good. We'll have to earn that.

With respect to just, like, the age thing and all that, very rarely will somebody say, although this has never happened in modern NBA history or modern pro sports history, a team this young winning it, very rarely does somebody go, but this team is going to do it because it's never happened before.

So I could totally understand why most people would be questioning the team because most people aren't calling their shot like Babe Ruth up there until they see it. That's what reporting does.

If you're analyzing or you're predicting or -- then you are able to say, well, it's very possible that could happen. But most people need to see things before they believe them.

Like I said before, seeing things for what they can be and not for what they are, to me that's what vision is. I'm not saying that we thought we were going to or we were going to be the last team standing, but we certainly weren't going to give ourselves a demerit because of our age.

It was possible, but if it was going to happen, it was going to have to be a one of one situation. So I could understand why people would have a hard time with that.

But that's the whole point earlier this year at the press conference in the fall, which was if you want to be the exception, you have to be willing to be exceptional. That point was basically aimed at the fact that we have to be the exception to the rule. It's never really happened before in the modern NBA.

The quest to be exceptional is met with having to do a lot of things that are unorthodox, and I felt like the team did that in a lot of ways and we were rewarded for it.

Q. Can you talk about Shai's season, one of the best seasons in NBA history, especially recently?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. He's continued this step by his ascent. He's gotten better every single year. His mindset has allowed him to take these steps and also not -- I don't feel like his progress is, like, volatile. I don't know if that makes sense, but I don't feel like it's built on things that can't be repeated and built up again because I think, like I said a couple years ago, he's a secure player. He's a secure person, which means he's a secure player.

He can see himself clearly and his limitations. Those don't intimidate him or make him defensive. He sees those clearly, which allows him to work towards those.

He also, because he's able to see himself clearly, he's not projecting those things on to his teammates or his opponents. He doesn't just see -- he doesn't say, well, this person is not doing this or this person is not as good. I think that's extremely rare.

He's never keeping score on others. He's looking at himself, how he can improve and how will that help those that he plays with, versus how are they supposed to be propping him up. That's why I feel so good about his progress, because I think you can absolutely build on all that.

Q. Just to follow up on Shai, can you shed any light on maybe his decision and you guys talking to him about a possible extension this summer versus next summer?

SAM PRESTI: All those questions about the contracts and things like that, I want to keep all that in house, primarily because I have so much respect for all these guys, and I don't want to -- those aren't public conversations. Those are conversations that need to be had face to face and internally.

I can say I'm extremely excited about being able to have conversations with these three guys, Shai obviously chief among the group, because I feel like they feel some ownership over what has been established, and I think that's really important in any type of discussion like this.

I'm really excited because I can't think of three guys that you'd rather sit down with and talk about their futures with the organization. But it's not a public thing. I would be disappointed if it turned into that.

Q. Unrelated, and I know it sounds crazy after you guys just won, but given the youth and some of the injuries you guys sustained, do you ever catch

yourself thinking how this team can evolve and get even better moving forward?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I'll probably have some more thoughts on that in the fall. I think we took some real -- one of the best things about this postseason for us was that every game we won meant we could get another game, another practice, another film session.

I've been very consistent for the last three years talking about maybe the greatest attribute that we have as a group is the rate of learning. Our rate of learning outpacing our experience level.

That really played out in this particular postseason because we were able to play, be confronted with some limitations, failures, go back and make some corrections. We didn't lose two games in a row in the postseason.

So each game we played, we could get better.

I think the team will be fundamentally different next season just because of the experience we gained, the improvement that many of these players will undergo, physical, mental, emotional.

Then the other thing is us not trying to grip too tightly to the formula we used last year. I don't know where we would be if we were trying to replicate the year before or we were trying to grip too tightly to something that worked previously.

I think having a beginner's mindset, staying extremely curious, trying a lot of different things and being very open to what the team and the signals that the team is sending you is really important to how we can scale from here.

I thought that one of the best things we did in the postseason was when we got the ball really moving, it took the tension out of the game for everybody. I think that's one of the most limiting things to, like, the rhythm of your team is reducing tension allows there to be more rhythm in the game, and I thought we did a really good job of that in Game 5 and Game 7.

I think there's an energy to the team when that's happening, and when we capture that, there's like a real cohesion, where all the individual strengths are kind of working together and no one is muted, nobody is stunted, and I think it really connects the team.

For us to be able to access that in some of the biggest moments really says a lot about the players.

There's so much more for the team to capture and find. I'm

excited to see that. But it may not look the same.

Q. Speaking on next year's team, you were part of a sustained run in San Antonio that won multiple championships but never repeated. What can you take from that experience that can help you next season?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I was thinking about those years. Obviously you reflect back. To be there -- I was there for three championships there, obviously in a much different capacity.

But I think a good understanding of, one, the importance of sustainability in terms of just humility -- I never felt like just observing those teams that no one got outside of themselves. Everyone really -- there was the mutual commitment that everyone had toward trying to create the same environment where we could have a chance again.

Understanding how hard it is to win period and not white knuckling but really just kind of staying who that group was and never really changed because of success, and that's what enabled the team to have sustainability and have a chance.

Even after losing the following year, being able to bounce back because of the personalities and the priorities, I think that would definitely be one of the things. And just applying the same mindset, which is not really deviating because you happen to be fortunate enough to win, but recognizing you kind of have to go back to the top of the slide and start again.

I say turn every page, but you kind of have to have the humility to realize that nothing carries over.

Q. Could you reflect on Mark's role in all of this. Oftentimes the guy that builds the team, the G-League coach and the guy that gets you over the top are two very different people. You've kept them all the way through. Can you reflect on how rare that is and the growth that he went through to get to this point?

SAM PRESTI: Sure. He's just been remarkable every step of the way. But he was remarkable when he was coaching the Blue. He's extremely steady. I think he has created an environment for the guys to have confidence.

Obviously we played a lot of guys throughout the year, and because of that, we had different players be able to perform in the postseason. It wasn't the first time that they've stepped foot on the floor together.

He really understands, like, the lifeblood of the franchise is the development process, and he's able to really lean into



that and foster that. That's how you have a guy like Ajay Mitchell play such a pivotal role until he was injured. On down the line, where you could easily get distracted by chasing outcomes, and that really hasn't been the case.

But that's why he's the coach.

But he's doing a great job, and I'm really happy for him. I'm really happy for him and all of the people that he works with on the coaching staff. I don't want to say I'm surprised at how good he is, but he's steadily grown, and he's just like every other person, like, learning from experiences.

I think we talk all the time about growing from experiences, and that's an organizational fundamental. But sometimes you can be limited by your experiences too. So you just haven't encountered something.

Sometimes it's not that you can't do it, it's just you haven't had exposure or been confronted with something. I think that was a big story of our team, and you could say for Mark or any of us in that respect. You can grow from experiences but you can also be limited by the experience you haven't had yet.

Each time our team was exposed to something new, it wasn't seen as a problem or anything. I think the way we tried to reframe it was this is just the next thing up in our process to become a great team. Losing the first game against Denver, down 0-1. Okay, we could look at that as a disappointment, which obviously it was, but also as now, here's the next thing in front of us as a team that we have to overcome to become a great team.

It's not an inconvenience. Basically now it's a necessity. Then we get confronted with a million other things in the postseason. Getting blown out a couple different times, and then having some momentum and then coming out and not playing well in Game 6, responding to that.

These are all things we just had never been confronted with yet. The fact that we -- I think the team saw those as, hey, this is just the next thing in front of us that we have to accomplish to achieve the goals of being a great team, and I don't think anyone was inconvenienced or saw that as a catastrophic event.

It's like, well, I guess this is part of the thing we have to get better at, and they met the moment.

Q. A few years ago you called KD, Russ, and Harden basketball warrior, God, genius. How would you describe Shai?

SAM PRESTI: Basketball artist. That's what I would say

with Shai. That's my first reaction to that.

Q. Is there a particular reason why you'd describe him that way?

SAM PRESTI: I just think he's got left and right brain working, and I think when you think about people that are extremely successful in what they do, they can't operate all on one side or the other. People have to have -- to me, the great people in life, business, sports, any industry, have to be able to access both sides, a creative side and then also a very objective side.

But what makes to me the greatest of the great are the people that have the emotional intelligence to decide when to call on each one of those.

So you can have access to both, but the key is knowing when to pull which club, at what time. You just can't use the hammer -- if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

So in this case, you've got to know when to use the hammer, and then you've got to know when to use the sander, if that's an example. And I think he's got that.

Q. Last summer you went out and traded for Alex and obviously went out and acquired Isaiah. We as outsiders can see some of what they brought, but I'm curious, what are you most excited about what those two brought to the team, changed the team, that sort of thing?

SAM PRESTI: I talked a lot about, like, good luck and fortune playing such a big role in this. There's so much of -- really, you can watch every game in the Playoffs and come up with examples, and historically, too, in the league, shots that went in that changed the course of history and is part of sports.

I think we got super lucky with the fact that both of those players were accessible to us. That's not the luck. The luck is their personalities were so well-suited for our particular team at this particular time, and we got both of them.

I don't know that that will ever happen, where we can find two elite role players that love being role players and are really tailor-made for our program and organization. Start the good fortune there.

Both of them have been -- they've exceeded expectations. I will say, just I've got to say this, I haven't seen a player become more engrained in the community this quickly than Isaiah. It needs to be spoken and said out loud. Incredible

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

commitment from day one. He's done more individual community work than I think I've ever seen a player do, and he's just been awesome in that way.

We've got to acknowledge that.

But those guys have been excellent. They've been very selfless, and they've been additive to what we've done. And they didn't feel pressured to demonstrate their value. They've allowed themselves to just be absorbed by the team, and they've pushed us forward in a lot of different ways.

Q. ...done with J-Will, and you've had success getting deals done with guys like Kenrich and Isaiah Joe and Wiggins through the years. What have those been like, getting those deals done with those guys?

SAM PRESTI: Well, one of the things that -- for me personally, I don't speak for everybody in these jobs, but when you have these situations where you're working on these contracts, I think I've always tried to make it feel collaborative.

Each one of the guys you described, like, they really take pride in being here. I think they feel some ownership over things that have taken place, as they should. So it feels like we're working on something together.

There have been times and there are times where it feels a little more, like, divisive, and those are the hard deals to make, and no one really feels great about those. But when you see somebody that -- to me the number one thing in those deals is trying to understand what the other person -- what's important to the other person, and then being able to express what's important to the team and how do you collaborate and find a way that everybody can walk away feeling good about the process, because there's going to be other negotiations and deals be made in the future and you want to feel like each one of those is leading to greater, stronger relationships.

I've learned a lot over the years going through that. I still remember the gratification of getting Thabo Sefolosha's deal completed. It was definitely his first one. I remember going to his house in the city and sitting across from him and trying to understand what was important to him and why this needed to be a certain way, and I tried to explain to him, here's kind of -- I need your help with this. If we can get this figured out.

I know we're talking about money with the guys, but just trying to understand what's important, like how can I make this work for you and how can you try to take into consideration what we're trying to make work here too.

That's really gratifying.

J-Will, I'm just so happy for him. Those are good ones to me because they're -- I think it brings you, like, a little bit closer because those things can also be very challenging. But when there's mutual commitment, you can find something most of the time. And if you can't, no one walks away feeling disrespected, team or player.

Q. Picking up on that, so you have a Chet and a Hartenstein and you drafted Sorber; now you extended J-Will's contract. He seems like he has a strong voice to the team even though he wasn't playing in the Playoffs. What do you think of his value to the team?

SAM PRESTI: J-Will? I just think he's a unique guy. He's a source of energy. I've got two examples for him. I think it was last year we were in Philadelphia and it was the middle of the year, and it was cold. We got to shootaround that morning, and it felt like we were outside. It was freezing in there because I think they have -- maybe they have ice under the floor. Felt like it was getting ready for a hockey game and it's like 10:00 in the morning. Everybody is just -- it's taking a while for the guys to get going.

But he was, like, that guy was yelling everyone's names out and making jokes and keeping everybody loose and kind of getting the energy redirected so that people weren't as totally focused on, like, the elements and just started to kind of -- he just kept the mood in the right spot. He had a nickname for everybody. That kind of thing.

Then this year when Chet got injured, he and Hart are the ones that helped him off the floor. In all my years doing this, I've never, ever seen a player in that much pain. I mean, it was really tough. Hart and J-Will stayed with him the whole time in the back, and it was uncomfortable. It was uncomfortable because when someone is in that much pain, it's hard to be a bystander. You know what I mean?

Those guys were both injured at the time. It was the greatest act of team support and teammate support I had ever seen. I don't know that it will ever be matched. They sat with him. They supported him.

Chet, I don't even know if he could realize they were there because of what he was going through. But those two guys -- that's the kind of stuff that makes the team unique. To understand how difficult that must have been for those guys to see someone in that much pain, and they stayed there the whole time until he left for the hospital.

And Chet -- we had to stop halfway to the locker room. He couldn't make it to the locker room, it was that bad. Eventually we got him to the table.



But those guys sat there, and they never left his side. I was just blown away by that. These are the things that go on inside teams that are unspoken, that when people are watching have these very, very strong opinions. They have 100 percent confidence with 10 percent of the information. 90 percent of the stuff is these types of things, and there's stuff like that happening all the time, and it can show up in different situations.

I have to think that those small acts of support and selflessness were somewhere inside of the last two months.

Q. You've talked a lot about the intertwined community and the team. What was it like for you to see the guys get off the bus and interact with the community like that?

SAM PRESTI: Well, the first thought is, like, where's the security. (Laughter). We're off script.

I hope the security guys are in good shape. It's hot, and they're going to be running a lot.

Look, that's what those days are for. I think it shows a great awareness by our players to see that it's a shared event. I also think there's something symbolic, truthfully, about them coming down to the same level as the people and not staying in this raised position. That's the part that I like the most about it.

I think it shows a little bit of humility, which is going to be so necessary for our organization going forward, and I mean that for everybody. I mean that from our ownership to our ticket salespeople. There has to be a great deal of respect for what took place, how fortunate we are, and we have to realize that we're also the same people that haven't had that level of success for 16 years. Nothing is changing because of that.

But those guys, our players, I think that was a great moment in that way.

Then also, we're seeing people at such varied ages. This was the thing that stuck to me was you have elderly people that are just, tears-in-their-eyes excited, and then you have kids. I actually checked this because I was interested. There was about 500,000 kids in Oklahoma between the ages of 8 and 15, and I don't know why I picked 8 to 15, but I figured where you're really a sponge to seeing things. Like your brain and your mind, this is where you are influenced forever without knowing. If you think about a lot of your core beliefs are being shaped by what you were watching, what you were doing, what you were hearing at

that age.

I think what a great thing for kids of that age to be consuming. Not the trophy but the way the trophy was earned, and hopefully they have people around them that are able to point out, here's what makes this special, and it doesn't have to be basketball. This can be applied to anything you're doing.

That's why I was saying when we look back in time, this season should animate our point of view for something much larger than winning Game 7 and bringing a trophy to Oklahoma, but what can we do with this for the young people in our community to recognize, hey, all that happened here, and the things that these guys are representing, they've always been present in our state.

500,000 kids get a better understanding of what makes J-Will so special or Kenrich Williams or Shai's humility or Dub's persistence in the face of scrutiny, or Chet Holmgren's resilience to come back from that injury, or Ajay Mitchell going from the 38th pick in the draft to playing, to working so hard to come back for two or three regular-season games so that in those last two games, we were resting a couple guys, but if Ajay Mitchell is not available, we wouldn't be able to have those guys resting.

I think these are so many things that transcend the actual season, but for young people -- and I know for a fact because there's so many people that the first mountain teams influenced, you know, and I think Westbrook had a huge influence on the community, the fearlessness, the never flinching. You can knock him for a million things, right, but you can't knock him for the heart and the competitiveness and the loyalty.

This is a whole new era of these qualities that I think this team can be teaching us about.

Look, they may not stay this way forever because this is very elusive. You don't get to hold on to it. It doesn't stay with you forever.

We're going to fight like hell to maintain the humility and the togetherness and the respect for the process that we need to have, but I do think what the team has done for the city is basically giving it a bit of a roadmap for the youth of like the collective good and sacrifice.

Q. I assume you had nothing to do or very little to do with the parade planning. If you did, I assume the one thing you would have said is it's got to go by the Memorial. How important was that to have that as part of the route?

SAM PRESTI: Well, our relationship there is well-documented. I think it was extremely meaningful for everybody that was affected directly by that period of time. I also think our players have a deep understanding of the history of the state, the reason why the moments like the other day are -- they resonate to a deeper core of the community.

It's hard to speak about it just because I never -- I'm so careful about I never want to overstep and act like I know. But I just think that the decisions that were made in the face of that tragedy are absolutely the reason that that day happened. Mayor Norick, like I said, Mayor Cornett, they demonstrated the ultimate vision.

That one photo of Shai with his arms out, that one is going to be around forever, and I think there will be a lot of meaning -- that will mean something different to every person.

Q. Looking back at scouting and drafting J-Dub, is there anything that sticks out to you?

SAM PRESTI: Just how little we really know about when you're selecting a team. I think there's a different between picking players and selecting a team. Every guy goes on a different journey and a different path. You don't know. You're making guesses. He deserves an enormous amount of credit for his approach.

It's kind of slowly scaled, and he's got -- I think he's a pretty grounded guy, and that comes from the people around him. You can trust him that I think he knows what it's about.

Even though he's limited by what he's experienced so far, like I said before, we grow from our experiences but we're also limited by the things we've been exposed to. His ability to confront these new experiences and apply the learnings pretty quickly is really impressive to me because he's had a lot thrown at him, and he's been able to flip the experience into wisdom pretty quick.

That doesn't happen without a lot of people that have been in his life, family, friends. Those people have kind of kept him grounded and allowed him to make these gains.

Q. I was wondering if you could take us back to when you're 29 and applying for the Sonics job. I know you guys had a good relationship dating back to San Antonio --

SAM PRESTI: Well, actually didn't. The first time I met Clay was when I interviewed with him. He was involved with the franchise before I got there. So Pop knew who he

was and had had some -- had known him, but I had never met him.

I mean, gosh, it's a long time ago. I was at the pre-draft camp in Orlando. We used to have it in Orlando. I was the assistant GM, vice president, whatever you call it, there in San Antonio, so I was really doing a lot of the personnel stuff.

I remember getting a phone call that they were interested in talking to me. I think we may have been in the Western Conference Finals. It was the year that we won the championship. So there was a lot going on.

But I remember flying out there in between series maybe and spending time with him. We met in Dallas because he happened to be in Dallas.

I think we had a pretty honest conversation. I was in a great situation. I mean, didn't have a lot of reasons to want to leave there. The team was, like, really good and they were great to me, incredible to me. They were investing in me in terms of just, like, giving me more responsibility and grooming me in a lot of different areas and I had no complaints whatsoever. I wasn't looking to leave.

But the challenge that was being presented was -- there was a lot to take on, and I liked that. I felt like Clay would be somebody that I'd like working for. So that's how that kind of -- and it just kind of grew from there.

Q. It's super rare, obviously, for you guys to still be together almost 20 years later. What about maybe his ownership style? There's some owners that are outspoken, some that want to be in the middle of everything. We never really talk to Clay and don't hear from him publicly. What does that do for you flexibility-wise to sort of --

SAM PRESTI: Well, I don't think it has to do with, like, his style. You can have people that talk a lot or are omnipresent. I don't think that necessarily means you can't be successful.

I think Clay is true to himself. He has so much respect for our players. I think that's the big one. He has so much respect for the challenges and the sacrifice an NBA player has to make, physically, emotionally. These are short careers when you consider career length and just any other profession.

I think he has tremendous appreciation for their families, and he wants people to have a great experience in Oklahoma and playing for the team. You can see that in just the way the former players embrace him.



Those interactions are a result not of, like, quantity of interaction but quality of interaction when he is there, when he is engaging with them. You can feel the authenticity of that.

I also think the relationships are not transactional, and I think that makes a big difference with everybody in the way in which he supports all of us and the resources that are required to have a team in Oklahoma City compete on an elite level.

But he's also, as I said, leading the rest of the owners in a way that is a great example. So many of them, Bill, Jeff, Everett, Bob, Jay, Mr. Kaiser, these guys, their ability to kind of park their own experiences or interests and allow Clay to manage that is an unbelievable competitive advantage for us, and we're, like, very, very grateful for that.

Q. You mentioned Topic; is there anything you can take from his season, even without playing, as far as growing, maturing --

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. We've seen this before, where somebody has a year where they can just focus on getting their feet underneath them as an NBA player, working on their body, learning the league. I think he's made great strides during this period of time.

We'll see when he gets out there playing in Summer League. He hasn't played 5-on-5 with, like, scoreboard, referees, people in the stands. We've got to give him some grace on that.

But certainly excited to see him and what he offers to the team. And like I said before, we're not trying to fit him into last year's team. We're just trying to see where we are with our guys when we're back here, and then we'll go through the same process we go through every year, which is discovering the team, experimenting, looking at a lot of different options and lineups, trying to develop the collective team and how everybody can work within that.

The cohesion of a team is how everybody's individual strengths can be operating kind of in unison without anybody really having to be stepped on or muted, and that's going to be different.

I've used the mixing board example in the past. I really like that one. But in order for somebody to be turned up a little bit, it might be that somebody needs to turn down. Not out. But I think we've seen that through the year, that in order to integrate or bring different people into the fold because they're able to contribute a certain level, in order to have

everyone playing well at the same time, there needs to be cohesion, and part of that is figuring out how we pull back in an area or maybe play a different lineup so we can get the best of somebody at a certain point in the game.

Q. Earlier you talked about the championship acumen that Perk brought to the table and the building. Do you feel that AC had sort of a similar impact on this team?

SAM PRESTI: Sure. I think Alex has a -- one, he has experience, but I think he has a clear understanding of, like, what's driving winning at a given time. That certainly was good because it only helps accelerate learning within the team.

He also demonstrates that when he's out on the court, so it's not just like a verbal add. There's an action component to it, as well.

He just has a tremendous amount of winning qualities and a sacrificial nature that whatever is asked of him, he's not looking for the conditions to be best suited for, like, his preferences or what's best for him. It's like, if this is what the game requires or the team requires, he's going to do that.

He's played a lot of games where he played 20 minutes or played 12 minutes during the season. His role fluctuated as much as anybody's.

Then when you get into the postseason, he's guarding Jokic, and that's a lot to put on somebody's plate. But he's not questioning that.

Q. The last couple of years we've seen teams do whatever it takes to avoid those aprons. How much does that shape or impact the way you build a roster?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think the number one thing on this question is we're in the very early stages of the CBA, and I think I've been around for four CBAs, maybe five, I can't remember, and what's clear is the way people respond and react in the first few years is not the way that the team or teams ultimately end up engaging with the CBA or the rules as it unfolds.

Great example or parallel would be we're limited by our experiences. Well, there's a limited amount of experience that teams have with these new rules because we only have a few that have been in situations where they're really impacting them, and then how many of those teams are similar versus the context that future teams might be engaging with these rules, and what else is going on around the league.

So I wouldn't be too quick to predetermine, oh, this is the way this works. You kind of have to see how every team interacts with it.

Certainly very mindful of it. Trying to study it and learn. But I don't think, like, we have a hard-and-fast way in which people are going to be interacting with this set of rules.

Now, for us specifically, the taxes and things, those things have always been in place for years. The repeater tax was conveniently introduced in 2012, as was the Rose rule and a lot of different things. The way we reacted wasn't necessarily the way people were ultimately reacting because people were learning and getting introduced to the different experiences.

But as constituted right now, we wouldn't face the repeater penalties until the next CBA. So we're far from that. The aprons, remains to be seen how we interact with those. But we'll have to learn as we go along.

Q. Do you have any thoughts on the uptick of achilles injuries across the league?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I just think there's certainly something to be learned from the injuries. It's a couple years in a row now that we've been in the postseason and the best players on certain teams aren't playing. I think the one thing we have to do is get away from the defensive nature of trying to convince people, players, and teams that there's no connection between the loads and the injuries.

We're kind of bordering on a level of -- it's almost insulting. It doesn't mean it's anyone's fault. It doesn't mean we don't want our best players playing every single night. It's not a matter of players not wanting to play or being soft or anything like that.

But I don't think we should be putting our head in the sand and acting as if there's no correlation. The reason is why, because if we're pointing to data, the data is from 20 years ago or 10 years ago. The game is a totally different sport than it was even several years ago because of the amount of possessions, the way the offenses work now, it's not people standing around the three-point line waiting for double-teams and then the ball to be kicked out.

There's so much involvement on every possession where we're playing almost two games compared to 10 years ago and how involved the bodies are.

Then you take into consideration the fact that everyone is trying to play as much as possible because of the 65-game rule. Then you take into consideration that the back half of the schedule is more condensed than it has been in the

last 10 years because the In-Season Tournament cannot have back-to-back games on those days. So you've got much less flexibility in the schedule, a game that's really red lining compared to past seasons in terms of the overall movement and torque on your body, the uptick in physicality that we have because that's where we want the game to go.

And it's a good thing, that's a good thing, but then you go right into the postseason and those games are even more physical. It's not a guys don't want to play thing. I think it's more a we want the guys to be able to play thing, and putting our heads together and be rational about it and not defensive, trying to produce numbers and data that indicates that the more you play, the more healthy you are.

It's probably somewhere in between, and I think we have to have respect for the players on that to try to understand what's going on with it.

Q. Would you personally be in favor of a shortened season?

SAM PRESTI: That's really not for my -- it's funny, throughout the year so many people have so many things to say about those things. I don't know all the things that they're balancing. You know what I mean? I don't know that.

All I know is the goal is to have as many players being available for the biggest games.

Well, the biggest games are the postseason, and so more interesting to me is we want the best players on the floor for the biggest games. I think we should want the best teams playing for the biggest games, and so I don't know how we can do that.

But if you look at the Western Conference right now, the depth of the teams, there's going to be several teams every year now that if they're in the other conference would be pushing for home-court advantage.

I don't know that that will ever -- I have no idea how that's happened or why, but it's been a quarter century that it's been like that. I don't think there's a -- I don't know the answer to that.

These are all things the league has to balance, and they have so much to do. I would say that the changes they've made recently have been so positive for the league. They're not going to get -- we are not going to get everything right as a league, but we shouldn't beat ourselves up about that, either.

The Playoffs were tremendous, and that's where people's focuses are. Look at the quality of the games and how good it is, and there's certainly probably things we can look at, but I wouldn't say that we're flailing around and things are going off the rails.

Q. Mark mentioned how with the longer season this year for you guys he wasn't really involved in the draft process or anything like that. How did things change for you with the expanded season?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, you've got to do more with less time-wise. But I didn't feel like anything preparation-wise was -- we had a draft workout Game 7, that morning. Probably a little more discipline because you're in the middle of a series and you have to compartmentalize that with a lot of sitting down, film, working out, different scenarios and things like that.

But I felt like we executed pretty well for where we wanted to be and the circumstances that we had.

Mark has always been involved. He's great because I can kind of lay out for him how I see a certain player, how I feel like their development path could unfold, certain things that we need to touch on or raise up or focus on.

Once he gets involved in that and he can really see that or align with that, it gives me a lot of confidence in what we're doing because drafting players is a very small part of the player turning into a good player. A big part of it is development, and we've seen that over 17 years here is players never walk in as finished products.

It's finding the right path and working with the player on exploring their potential and creating environments that are optimistic but also creating accountability.

He's always been really good with that. Even in this case, we got what we needed. In some cases, it may have been a good distraction for him at a certain point, but I felt like we did pretty good, and certainly not complaining. You want to be in that position.

I think Thomas and Brooks are -- they're going to do well for us.

Q. As you were assembling this team, seems like you were gathering players that had some supreme skills or abilities in sort of different ways. I'm wondering as you were putting the team together, did you think that the collection of talent that you were assembling could be as good as this squad was defensively?

SAM PRESTI: You know, I'm really careful on, you never

know anything. You really don't. I think it's also so easy once you have something like this happen to build this beautiful narrative or mosaic of how it all worked.

The good thing is for me is I document -- I write so much down. I'll never be able to do that to myself. So the indecision and the unsuredness of so many things, like I have to read that. It's like, well, I really didn't think that, or wow, this guy is -- good thing we didn't take this guy, who I really wanted, and we took this guy, because it ended up working out.

You have to face it down with a lot of humility. But the one thing I will say, and I said this in the fall, is the compounding nature of the defenders that -- I'm glad I said that in the fall because it doesn't sound like I'm creating this mosaic.

But Caruso's ability to not be on the ball all the time makes him -- like it multiplies his effect because he's now Lawrence Taylor. He's reading and reacting and he's not necessarily on the line, which I think makes him really good.

Then that ability, knowing that you have Chet or Hart behind that collection of defenders. So it's how all that scales up and less about them as individuals. That was interesting, didn't know how that was going to manifest itself.

Truthfully, we didn't have many games where we could see that because we didn't have everybody together. I think I said Hart and Chet played more minutes in the Playoffs together than in the entire regular season, and I don't know what the numbers are for Cason and Caruso, but there's just a lot of unfamiliar territory for us.

As we come back, we'll have the experience from the postseason, but also we need to bank some more time together, which I think will help.

Those are the nuances of the teams that really make it special.

When I really started noticing that -- I used to watch when we had Manu Ginobili in San Antonio, who called me the other day. There's a good example of that. He's one of my most favorite people, and I learned so much from watching him.

Steve Kerr and Avery Johnson and Danny Ferry and Steve Smith and Bruce Bowen, all these unbelievable -- obviously Tim and Parker -- watching those guys, for me, when I was 23 years old, 24 years old, was pretty helpful.



But we had Ginobili, and he'd always play with the Argentinian National Team in the summertimes, no matter how long we played. When he played with those teams, there was just such a synergy and a telepathic nature to how they played, specifically with another great player named Fabricio Oberto. It was like a symphony and you used to wonder, how do they do get that?

Well, they've been doing that together since they were like 12. Then we eventually brought Oberto to the Spurs, and it was the same thing because they could read each other and you could see almost like it was symphonic.

I think the Warriors had had some of that when you're watching them. You can't help but feel good when you see that kind of basketball, and I hope that we can inch toward that, when there's a little bit of a telepathic nature and a symphonic nature to how the game is being played.

But you need reps. You need time. As I said many years ago, it's all about serving the game and not making plays.

When you're serving the game, just playing it so naturally, the tenth of a second that you could be thinking, could I get a bucket here, if that ball is moving, it makes it much harder for the defense to react and you can maintain advantages that way.

When we were at our best this year, like I said, I thought we were taking the tension out of the game. It was just very fluid. We had a great rhythm and guys could step into shots and make shots. I thought that's when Wiggins really started to take off this year.

Shai's understanding of the energy of the ball and when it's really got that.

One of the things I think for us to access more consistently is within the game when we don't have that, being able to course correct and find that. It's like the capability of the team and not just the natural ability. It's like one notch above your natural talent level is like finding this symphonic nature, and when you do that, it also connects the other end of the floor.

Sometimes for us the defense drives that on the offensive side because the defense has been so good. But that to me is the part I'm really interested in watching over time.

Q. You mentioned that 8.5 percent healthy stat. Can you kind of contextualize that for us, maybe compare it to league average and what that means for this team?

SAM PRESTI: I have to go back and look at that. I know that I think we were third or fourth in most minutes lost due

to injury. It was like Dallas, Philly, and one other team. I think we were right up there.

But it was pretty significant. It wasn't the number one, but we were shorthanded. But I say that not to make an excuse or make it seem like, geez, we just had to walk uphill to school both ways. It actually is what forged us and accelerated our team, because of the way I think we absorbed it and saw it as opportunity for growth, and hey, there's going to be seasons like this, there's going to be weeks like this or months like this.

This is the next thing up for us to overcome if we want to be a great team. Even if we fall short, that doesn't mean we won't get that done. It just means we weren't ready to do it yet.

So in a lot of ways, those things, as unfortunate as they were, were not seen as complete roadblocks or pitfalls. They were just like, well, I guess this is what we have to figure out how to confront if we're going to be a team that is capable of our true best selves.

Q. I think it was in Detroit where Ous was injured early in the year. What are your expectations for him in the off-season as you guys try to develop players at a great rate in the off-season?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it's a great example. He had some great moments for us this year in real rotation minutes, minutes he could not have provided the year before. I like his path because when we drafted him, he was maybe the youngest or one of the youngest players in that draft class, so we knew this was going to take some time.

He also was coming from overseas, which is another factor you have to kind of bake into the pathway just with language and some different assimilations.

I feel pretty good about where he is. I wish he had more time when we had those injuries because when he did get those chances, he had a huge game against Dallas. We wouldn't have won that game against Dallas. I think he had one against San Antonio that was really good, maybe Denver. He was contributing to winning. That's all you can ask for from these guys.

I think he's on the right track. Now, his biggest change to me is just his body, his physical. He's really, really changed his body and that's through a lot of hard work, and that's, I think, given him a different level of confidence which has helped him play in these games.

Q. You've talked a lot about the first and second mountain and I think a lot of people relate winning a

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

championship as getting to the mountaintop. Would you say you're still on the second mountain or what does it look like for you guys going forward?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we associated these two things because I think we had a period of time where we sustained a certain level of success. I don't want to bother you with the stats. But we had a lot of success. We didn't win the championship, and there's no -- we're not ashamed of that. We had a lot of other great things that we did, but we couldn't get that done with that particular run.

But we were up there competing. I think we averaged, I don't know, 50 something wins a year for 12 years or something like that. I really don't know. Then it was time to pivot that team.

The mountains are less transactional looking for symbolic -- symbols of achievement. We're not into symbols of achievement, if you can't tell. We love the fact that we're being rewarded, but it's how we got them, what we've learned through that experience than necessarily just like the pure outcome itself. Because like I said, it can be very hollow and very hard to gear up again if you see that as like an end point versus a benchmark along the way to something bigger.

And that's what the mountain thing is. It's like we want to stay as competitive as we can and watch the growth of the team and this particular core of guys for as long as we can, and there's going to be ups and there's going to be downs. There's going to be triumphs and there's going to be failures.

But the mountain is more an ability to sustain performance. That doesn't mean just -- sustaining performance isn't just like winning everything all the time. I read you those stats. In the last 10 years, only one team has done it, and the other six out of ten lost in the second round or before. That's going to be pretty hard.

But that's what being in the fight and still climbing that mountain is about.

Q. Have you gotten any sense of what this team's mindset is moving forward? I know you talked about obviously experiencing this moment, but it seems like there's sometimes a mindset shift needed --

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a little early for that. I think it's really important that our players, our coaches, they really stay present and experience this fully, but also properly by being very grateful and recognizing how fortunate we are and that it didn't have to unfold the way it did.

We have to have great humility for what it is that took place and realize that we controlled a lot of the things that we could, but there are a lot of things out of our control during the year that stacked up for us in different ways. Some of them could have been perceived as negatives at the time that ended up being positives.

At the appropriate time, I think we'll be able to reset that, but I wouldn't want to rob anybody of the emotion and of being present and of being reflective of everything that went into this, but we'll have to shift that, and when we do, I think we'll do a good job with it, but we'll have to have our priorities in order.

Q. Do you have book recommendations?

SAM PRESTI: Sure. I wouldn't say they're recommendations. But things I've read a little bit of. I'm a dabbler.

Gosh, I knew I was going to screw this up. I think it's called "What Art is," or "What Art Can Be." It's a small book. It's a really tiny book, but it's a great book about just the purpose of art and the value of art in a person's life, and I thought it was pretty good.

I'm reading a book on -- biography of Ben Franklin, and that's been awesome.

I read an incredible book on Bobby Kennedy, Jr., JFK's brother. That was really great. I loved that. I want to read another one on him.

Then I'm still reading one of Caro's books, one of the last Caro books that I haven't read. I'm going way out of order on these Caro books which I don't know if it's really smart or not, but I'm through "Passage of Power." I'm getting into "Passage of Power." That got diverted into the Bobby Kennedy book because he's such a main figure in this other book, and I was like, I want to know more, and then I kind of paused and was like, I've got to get back to "Passage of Power."

Then I just dabble in other things. But I think those would be the primary ones that I've been -- oh, I'm reading a book about the Jazz Messengers, Art Blakely, who's a drummer who ran the Jazz Messengers, which is a famous jazz group that so many great jazz musicians would come through and they'd go on to these other careers, and it's really about how they cultivated these musicians and found these musicians.

Kind of the way the band was run, it's fascinating. He's obviously a massive figure in jazz, and playing in that band was a bit of a rite of passage to a degree, so I'm fascinated

by that. That was a hard one to get.

Then I mentioned the book "What You Give Away You Get to Keep Forever." That is now available. It's a story -- it's a memoir of a guy named Tom Farrell. He's the person that -- huge factor in my life because I played basketball with his son in Boston, and he was a freshman.

His name is Tommy Farrell. He was at Game 7, just to give you an example of the kind of -- just the relational aspects of life and how it shows up in your moments like that.

But Tommy got injured, and myself and another captain kept him in school. This dude was super grateful. Ran a camp in Aspen, Colorado -- excuse me, he was the superintendent of schools in Aspen, Colorado. There was a camp there in the summer.

That's where RC Buford ran the camp. So as a result of us kind of being there for his son, he invited one of us out to work the camp. It happened to be me because my good friend, Tommy Arria, who met me in Indiana before Game 6, fatefully, basically said, you should do it because Tommy is an athletic director at Cambridge Rindge and Latin, where Patrick Ewing went to high school, and he's the best friend anyone could ever have.

So that's where I met RC, and that's how that unfolded.

Mr. Farrell was an unbelievable educator, administrator. He opened schools all over the world, Japan, and he's from Maine. Anyway, he wrote a memoir before he passed away and his sons got it published recently, so I got a copy of that. You can get that online. It does -- all the proceeds go to a scholarship fund in his name.

But I'm reading it because it's like -- he would always stay in touch with me, but when I went to his services it was all students, former students that he had, and it's like, just another great example of, like, the people that touch young people's lives, like how much of an influence you can have on people.

It's like you're sitting there going, wow, if he was sending me notes and emails -- he's doing the same thing for all these other people. The Farrells are a special group of people. So Tommy, his mom, his two brothers were -- his three brothers, excuse me, were here for the last game. It was pretty cool.

So that book I got. It's kind of wild because I didn't know all this stuff about Mr. Farrell. It's like, this is how it really started. He was a great basketball coach in Maine in high school. Yeah, it's been really good.

Q. What was the name of the art book?

SAM PRESTI: I'll get it for you. I think it's the History of the Jazz Messengers. It's kind of hard to find. It took me a while. But it's really good, even if you just do YouTube you can see -- the documentaries on the Jazz Messengers are pretty amazing.

And if you look at the people that came through those bands, they're just like -- it's like a who's who of jazz. I'm not like a jazz expert, but I like the methodology of the group and he's quite the character himself.

Q. There's been a rumor out that you have an album of your own music, of jazz music. That's been the rumor. Can you confirm or deny that you not only have one album but two albums of jazz music that is floating around this area?

SAM PRESTI: Yes, I can confirm that. This was a long, long time ago when I was in college. I certainly didn't expect it to become public, part of the public record.

But yeah, we did a couple of those, and it was a great experience for me getting to be around so many people -- the second one is the one -- if we were going to unearth one, I was like, maybe it'll only be the second one, it won't be the first one.

But you have to be able to laugh at yourself. You have to be able to have fun with it. We were all young at one time.

I learned a lot from that experience, especially the second one. The second one was -- I learned a lot from the first and then carried that to the second one.

But yeah, as long as they don't unearth my break dancing videos when I was eight then I'm going to consider myself ahead of the game, so I've already called my mom and said you know where those are, right? They cannot see the light of day.

You have to laugh at yourself, have fun with it. We were all young. It was part of my life that I had no idea would see the light of day, and it's a little embarrassing, but it's all good. It's all good.

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