

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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## Sam Presti

### Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: Morning, everybody. Appreciate everybody being with us today. As I've done in the past, I'd like to begin with some comments directed to our fans and supporters, and if we can get through those things, then we'll get to everybody's questions.

But I'd like to kind of start with some context that this is the 80th season in NBA history. When you pause to think about that span of time, what's remarkable is how each era has built on the last to carry the game forward. Generations of great players, visionary owners, visionary commissioners, innovative managers, innovative coaches, and landmark rule changes that include the 24-second shot clock, the widening of the lane twice, and the three-point line being introduced in 1979.

Today every game is streamed all over the world. The WNBA is thriving. Our league in Africa is growing, and we're talking about creating a new league in Europe. We've got data that tracks the movement of every single player across every single game every single night with instant replay. We have an instant replay center that could be the greatest advancement in game flow since the introduction of the 24-second shot clock in 1954.

But over those 80 years, with all those changes in innovations, one thing has been the fundamental through-line for the game itself, and that is the soul of the game. Basketball is humanizing, improvisational, collaborative, continuous, and it's very, very simple in how it's presented to our fans.

I'd encourage all of our fans in Oklahoma to look at the earliest years of the league, the people who helped build and shape the game, and you'll find surprising consistency. You'll find greatness of teams, players, and you'll even find that the challenges that the league has faced are very similar and repeat itself over time.

When you step back to see just how far the game has come, and although our time in the NBA is pretty brief, it gives you an appreciation for just how fortunate we are in Oklahoma City to be a part of the league and the NBA at



large.

Here in Oklahoma, inside those 80 chapters of NBA history, we're embarking on our 18th. It's been well-documented that last season was a special year in our very, very brief organizational history. But the process of becoming a great team did not end last season.

Every team in the league has something in front of them that is their passage to the next stage of their growth and development. The next step in front of us, in order to become a great team again, is the discipline and humility to turn the page.

Effectively turning the page allows us the necessary renewal to treat this coming season with the respect it deserves. To maximize this coming season, we have to voluntarily divorce ourselves from the success of last season or it will hold us back.

As we turn the page, we're not trying to repeat an outcome. We are trying to repeat a process, a process of improvement that will position us well to improve and play our best basketball at the end of the season.

Turning the page and separating ourselves from our success last year is absolutely the most competitive thing we can do as a team and organization to optimize the coming year and the opportunities that it presents.

People handle the year after winning the championship differently. The challenges are well-documented, and the odds are clear that they're severely stacked against the team that won.

The primary reason for that is simple: It's very, very, very hard to win one time. It requires a combination of positioning, execution, and you need randomness to fall in your favor.

With that in mind, we're not looking to imitate ourselves or get tied down to what has worked in the past. That's really never been the way we've approached anything. It won't be how we approach this season.

We've used every season as an opportunity to open ourselves to new challenges, new possibilities, and if we are to stack another successful NBA season next to last



year, it won't be with the same exact formula.

Simply put, we as a basketball team have to get better. We have to improve. In that sense, we're all beginners again, coming into the season with an open mind, staring at a blank canvas.

In order to get better, we have to remain flexible. We have to be open to where improvement comes from, and we can't walk into the season pre-determining anything at all. We can't become fragile or rigid because of the way we go about the season.

Now, all this probably seems boring and mundane, but the fundamentals of sustaining anything don't light up social media, and they don't make for great podcasts. Although there's a whole new set of challenges, we have 17 years of a way of working and that the program has been built on. Many of those ways are repetitive and unremarkable in their appearance.

But we also believe these are the things that have positioned us for success now and into the future. A focus on progress, improvement, discovery of the team by being open to new ideas, that's just stacking days. Staying emotionally regulated with a deep, deep respect for our competitors and especially how great the Western Conference is, possessing a 0-0 mindset.

We have to build our lineup versatility through the year but understanding that the team is going to take different shapes and form because we're still the sixth youngest team in the NBA. We just have to continue to position ourselves to have a very deep and flexible team whose rate of learning far exceeds their years of experience.

We've got a lot to learn about the team. When you think about it, Chet and Hart have only played about 20 games together. Chet himself played 32 games last year. Ajay Mitchell, 36 games; Topic hasn't played a game for the Thunder yet.

When you think also through the playoff rotation last year, of all the players that played in every playoff game, those players played a collective 11 games last year at the same time.

So a big part of our success in Oklahoma City has been our tolerance for the messiness and even the regression of pursuing progress and growth. This tolerance has kept us uncommon in forging and finding new ways and more flexible ways to win, so there's a ton to be excited about.

With that said, we also have to be honest with ourselves that we are susceptible as any team to the human nature

that follows any degree of high level of success. All these things are just our passage to try to maximize our team to be at our best by season's end.

Since the earliest days of our repositioning, we've talked about having an offensive play style that can be scaled and built upon, and every year that Mark has been the coach we've gotten better incrementally. We took steps last year in obviously offensive rating. Our expected numbers were up, our turnovers were down, but I don't think we're at a place yet where other teams are sitting around feeling like they can't stop us.

So we're going to make strides there with incremental improvements hopefully, potentially hopefully getting to the free-throw line a little bit more, maybe some offensive rebounding, but there's opportunity for us to continue to take those steps.

I think the other thing with that is when we're playing rhythmically, when we're playing in sync and on time, everybody in the building offensively feels better. The fans feel the energy from the team. When we get to that level consistently, it's really fun to watch. Now, no team can live in that, but you have to do everything you can to try to touch it as much as possible.

I think all of us know that all across every NBA practice facility, the league is filled with talent. But we also know that it takes a lot more than just a talent to be able to find ways to win in various conditions. One day the group postgame interviews are going to run their course, and that's going to be okay because what's made our team so strong the last several years is the shared experience of the distance traveled by the players, both good and bad. That's built belief and trust, and that trust has been tested at times, but it's always made us better.

It's allowed people to rely on the complementary nature of their teammates. Our complementary players allow us to be a complete team. In sports, complementary leads to complete.

To the credit of our most talented players, they've shared space and created space for everyone around them. We'll need to continue to cultivate that environment if we're to improve, and that's the charge for us this season.

Ultimately, our best players are going to be judged on winning and their ability to elevate their teams beyond the sum of their parts. That's the history of basketball. These are the values of the game. This is the signature of individual greatness in a team sport.

In closing, no one has ever given us a hand up in the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

standings. There are no built-in advantages, geographical climate, coastal economic bases, or in-state tax laws to our benefit. Whatever we want, we've had to make happen. In this case, making it happen means having the discipline and humility to turn the page and push ourselves forward.

This approach fits us best because in Oklahoma, we are builders. We are not guardians. We're not guarding or defending the past. That's over, and it's ours.

We are pursuing our future and whatever comes next. So we have the opportunity to be a really, really good team again. But it's not going to happen by imitating ourselves or trying to create a specific outcome.

If we want to pursue excellence, we have to let go of last year and start again, turning every page, stacking every day with no guarantees, and of course, no silver platters. Just our state motto to remind us who we are, what we stand on, and what we're about.

So chapter 18 is yet to be written. Last season we talked about nothing being expected but anything being possible, and that's how we feel again this year.

I really appreciate being able to speak directly to the fans in that manner. It's a really important opportunity for us as an organization to be able to convey in that way.

From here, I'll answer any questions you guys have, and we'll stay here as long as you want.

**Q. Have you seen differences or changes in the off-season as far as attacking the season, trying to attack a championship versus trying to defend a championship?**

SAM PRESTI: I think this plays into exactly what I was talking about. We've never come into the season looking for a specific outcome. Of course everybody wants to end the season as the last team standing, but for us, it's always been about improving and following process to improve.

Those of you that have followed the team since we've been here since 2008 can go back and see that's how we've approached everything, so it's not like we're unveiling this new thing now.

But yeah, we're not chasing an outcome or trying to repeat a process. We are trying to improve, and that's really the way we've gotten to where we are, and I think we have to have the discipline to stay with that.

**Q. What was it like seeing the players take the Larry O'Brien across the world, and from your perspective,**

**is there anything about that that sticks out to you?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, it's great to see the players have the opportunity to be with the people that mean the most to them and that -- I've often talked about -- anybody associated with the NBA, quite frankly, or all of us as people in anything we do are in the situations we're in because of the people that helped us: mentors, friends, teammates, teachers, family members.

So the ability to share that back with people I think is really humanizing, and I think it's great. I felt like Isaiah Joe was in the Philippines for -- I thought he moved there, and then I saw him the other night for the first time and he told me he was there for two days, and I didn't believe him.

But yeah, all that stuff is great. I mean, but the harsh reality of it is when you're going to those places, people are congratulating you personally, but each one of the people that have a trophy at that time realize that it's really not because of them; it's because of the collective whole.

That takes, as I said before, a level of discipline and humility to come to terms with that prior to the start of this year.

That's not to say last year wasn't a tremendous thing, but we have to put that in its proper place. We'll always have it. But if we're serious competitors, we have to turn the page towards we need to get better, and that's the main focus for us.

**Q. How many Larry O'Briens do you have?**

SAM PRESTI: We have one that has traveled a great distance. I mean, it's a great job for a young person to be able to take that everywhere, but I don't think -- I definitely couldn't hold up with all that.

Yeah, no, it's one piece of metal.

**Q. Reflecting on how long it took to get to the mountaintop, for your first off-season, what was that --**

SAM PRESTI: Well, for me personally, I think I've always said this, that hasn't been, like, the end-all thing. Obviously I want to win like anybody else. I know our organization wants to win like anybody else. But I've done this long enough to realize so much of it is random and there's things that happen that you have to overcome, you have to go through, and as I said before, putting yourself in position year in and year out to have an opportunity to me is -- I think that's the hardest thing to do because you have to bounce back from things. You have to work through things.



I'd like to think that every team that wins, it's a result of a lot of work or process that goes into that, and the outcome is a result of those things. Sometimes you can have great process but not have a good outcome. We happen to have that, which is great, and I'm happy for our players, as I said earlier, because I think they prioritize the right things, but now we have a whole new challenge in front of us.

The challenge isn't to necessarily deny ourselves of that moment, but if we are serious about being an elite team, we have to improve, and that's a big part of that.

**Q. You had a chance in the off-season to extend Shai, Jaylin, and Chet. I wonder if you'd tell us about the importance of that from your perspective and then also were you able to go to each of those guys with those offers and just kind of on a personal level what that looked like from your perspective?**

SAM PRESTI: Look, I'm always hesitant to talk about specific negotiations or conversations. I think those things need to stay with the people that were included in that.

It's obviously really significant for us to have those types of players committed to the organization for the amount of time that they are. All of them are still improving. All of them have demonstrated their ability to impact winning on both sides of the ball.

We're really fortunate to have these guys, but I've also talked about mutual commitment in these press conferences many, many times, and when you get to a point like that, it's a continuation of that commitment that they've made to the organization and that our organization has made to them.

We're looking forward to continuing to explore the potential of those players as a group going forward.

**Q. Do you feel like -- you talked about the commitment between the organization and them. Do you feel like the three of them are in a way committed to each other?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, you'd really need to ask them that question. I don't want to speak for them. But I would say that when you have the shared experiences from the distance traveled through good and bad, it only helps relationships.

At the end of the day, a team is like a living, breathing organism that's built on relationships. It doesn't mean you have to be best friends with everybody, but you do have to understand the people you're playing with to try to reach

them, especially over 82 games plus two months of the Playoffs if you're fortunate enough to be in that situation.

Because the NBA season, it can be mind-numbing, and a big part of it is understanding kind of where everybody is and having some -- like I said earlier, having tolerance for the people you're playing with and trying to understand what they're going through because nobody is having their best day, except for JWill. He's the only one that's having his best day every day. But other than that, everyone is going through something.

**Q. Mark and the players have talked about kind of the process of exploration, the openness that they've had, and I wonder from your perspective what it's like to see the players take ownership in that. It's not always guaranteed that players will embrace that level of openness and exploration, but it seems like your guys really enjoy that process through a long season.**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, look, I think for us, the bedrock of so much of what we've tried to work with has been through things we've talked about in these press conferences or in this building when we were losing a lot of games. So philosophically, things haven't really changed, right.

I think that helps renew your outlook each and every year, right, because it gives you something else to continue to chase, to try to figure out. So it's not something that's reactionary to a circumstance.

They've done well by that, but we're not taking for granted that -- people aren't computers. That's why I said before, we're as susceptible as anybody else to things that get in the way. I don't think there's any reason to like shield ourselves from that. To act as if we wouldn't be or couldn't be would be extremely arrogant.

Do I hope that we don't run into that? Do I think we will? I don't think so. But it's a team and these are people.

That's why I think a big part of our charge here is the discipline and the humility to focus forward and recognize that we have to get better. Like that's a big aspect for our team.

I think we can get better, but, like, that's not optional. We have to voluntarily opt in to trying to be the best team we can be, not getting away from kind of the things you talked about, the bedrocks of the program.

**Q. Related to that, a lot of your opening statement had to do with basically fending off complacency. Is that something you're going to hammer into the team? Is that something they find out on their own? Are you**



## curious to see how that plays out?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I wouldn't -- for me, I wouldn't say that we're trying to fend off complacency. I think what we're trying to do is chase improvement. So certainly complacency is present in every NBA season, right. Play 82 games, there's ebbs and flows to the season. Every team is going through that.

The rain clouds are circling three or four teams at all times and then they move on to another set of teams. So you're going to find that.

Now, for us, when we have our ebb, we're going to have our regression, which we see as a form of, like, improvement, or the pain of improvement, is to go through some of that and fight and of course correct that. There will be, as we know, especially with where we are as a team, pretty reckless overreactions and hypotheticals and trade machines will be fired up and that's just the world we live in.

But it's a natural state of 82 games that you go through. We went through that at different times last year.

Actually, if you can have the confidence, and I think we've called it calm persistence, to work yourself out of some of those things, that's another big step as a team we can make, but you're going to have to confront some of those things in order to overcome them.

Complacency could be one of those, but that's why I think falling into this obsession with improvement is one way to keep yourself focused and steady through that.

**Q. During the Finals, Adam Silver joked that David Stern's job sometimes was just flying back and forth from Boston to LA. We've seen a ton of repeat champions in NBA history but seven new champions in the last seven years. Aside from it just being hard to do, what are some of the other things in place that the league has done that makes this difficult now?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I don't think it's necessarily the league has done anything. If you break that down -- I might be wrong about this, but I think the last six haven't made it out of the second round.

It just goes to show that it's really, really hard to win. I don't want to make it seem like it's simple because it's certainly not; there's a lot of context that goes into that.

But the reality is that what's really hard to do is just win one time because it requires so many different things to fall into place. Then outside of that, the history of the league, as I

was saying at the very beginning, which I think is really important, is each era kind of leads to the next era. The players and teams inspire or demand for you to improve and get better and lead you to the next thing.

It could be that, like, that's where we are with this era. It doesn't mean it will necessarily stay that way, but we're not going to have the answers to those questions until we can look back historically.

But I really feel strongly that the thing that makes it really hard is that it's very hard on its face, when you think about how hard it was for us to win last year. But it was also hard the year before, the year before that, the year before that, and it's going to be like that going forward because the league is so tough.

Therefore for us, it's not repeating an outcome, but it's repeating a process by which we can improve and get better through the season. I think if you fall into that and get obsessed with that, it will give you your best opportunity to take advantage of the situation if it's presented to you.

**Q. Silver has talked about, though, wanting more parity in the league, and maybe the new CBA is pointed toward that. Are there some inherent challenges that go beyond just it being hard to repeat?**

SAM PRESTI: Sure, but I think also the new CBA hasn't been around for all of those changes either. And I would say I think that the new CBA is by far the most consistent with what we've said as a league we value, which is if the team is well-managed, has a chance to be profitable and to compete for the title. These rules are certainly more geared towards that.

But we're still so early in the system that I'd hesitate to say that we know how it's behaving or how teams are reacting.

I do think, at least anecdotally, and I'm not a huge believer in anecdotal evidence, but people really like the product on the floor because it's so dynamic and the teams are evenly matched. I said this in the open when I was talking about the history, the thing that carries the game, really carries the game, is the product on the floor and the way in which it's presented in the NBA is so unique because it's easy for people to understand.

Our players are so human because there's no equipment; know what I mean? You're so close to everybody. You can hear them. You can see their facial reactions. Even the bench is easy to see.

I think it's a great game for that reason. But the game itself



is the thing that drives our industry and our business, and all these other things that I mentioned about Europe or -- it's happening because of the generations of people that are pushing it forward. We'll see what this era is, but we won't know until we look back on it years down the line.

**Q. One of the most significant processes this season will be working a player with Topic's talent into an already-established team. What did you think of his performance in Summer League, and how do you see based on that him fitting into something that's really established already?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I think you're making a great point. I would bring it back to we come into every year with, like, we're looking at it as a blank canvas, and if we didn't, we wouldn't have discovered or figured out a lot of different ways to win. Whether it was Chet at the 5, then -- if we were just tied to how we did things, we wouldn't have gone and gotten Hart or played Kenrich at the 5.

One year we played three point guards at the same time with CP, Dennis, and Shai; we played two bigs with Kanter and Adams. That type of discovery -- I could go down like a laundry list of these attempts, and not all of them were fruitful.

But I think for us, we don't come in and say, well, this is established. We're saying, how can this get better.

There might be some regression or there might be things that don't look perfect or as clean as they did last year, but that's all in an effort to see if we can improve the team from where it is because we're definitely -- if we're going to have another really good year and position ourselves to play our best basketball at the end of the year, it's not going to be by gripping so tightly to what's worked prior. In fact, that would probably be the first step in making sure that we stunt ourselves.

So we have to come in thinking that way, and we always have. So with respect to Topic, we just have to see where he is, how the team performs, where the combinations are, and give that some time and not overreact if things are not smooth immediately, with any players specifically. Because a team is, like I said, the sixth youngest team in the league still, so there's still going to be a ton of growth within the team during the year, let alone what's been done in the off-season.

There's some guys, I'm sure, that are going to come back and look significantly different, but we have to be really patient with that.

I think that approach -- I keep coming back to this concept

of renewal. I really think that approach helps renew you every year so you don't feel like you're bound to the way things have always been done. I also think it creates a lot of competition, which is healthy, and that's how you build a deep flexible team with a lot of lineup versatility.

But it doesn't happen unless you're intentionally welcoming that.

**Q. In the time that you have been able to reflect over these last couple of months, are there any moments specifically from this past season that stick with you or stand out?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I mean, I think the big thing is -- there's too many to list. But I'll give you one example. When you're in -- when you're outside of Oklahoma, people congratulate you on the season. When you're inside of Oklahoma, people thank you. I think that's a really unique experience because people are able to speak directly to who they were with, when they first had a season ticket, the emotions of different things, favorite players from the past.

It really is -- I talk about mutual commitment between our organization, ownership organization and our players, but here it's also -- there's also this other kind of interesting relationship with the community in which people feel a part of that, and I think that makes it special.

So when I'm saying to you we have to turn the page, that's competitively. That's not telling other people they shouldn't enjoy it. They should enjoy that. But ultra competitors, anyone that's competed without guarantees will tell you that you need to separate yourself from that to give yourself the best opportunity to improve and get better.

So that's where our head is. That's where we have to be because we have so much respect for the other teams in the NBA, and especially the Western Conference because it's dominated the NBA for a quarter century.

We have to improve from where we are, and I think we have the right mentality to do that.

**Q. Sean Marks mentioned how he studied the Thunder and gave you guys a lot of credit for the way you built things. Is there a certain level of pride knowing that teams are now chasing that?**

SAM PRESTI: No, I have so much respect for Sean. I'm just glad -- it was a big accomplishment for me in San Antonio; I was in charge of training camp, getting the people in for training camp, and Sean Marks was deciding between the Clippers and the Spurs, and I worked on that



for weeks.

Luckily for us, he ended up coming to camp and became a great locker room presence and built a beautiful relationship with Ginobili and Tim Duncan and has catapulted himself into an unbelievable executive from that point in time.

I really appreciate him, and he's a good friend.

I don't think any teams are looking specifically at one team. The NBA is not a chess game, it's a poker game. Chess, you set everything up, everyone has the same pieces, and you start from there. That's not the NBA. It's poker. Everyone has got a different hand that they've been dealt. They have strengths, they have limitations in that hand. You're also on a continuum, so you're picking up -- you don't get to just clean the -- hit reset and start from scratch.

It would be a lot easier, to be honest with you, if people could reset with no liabilities, but in this case, everybody is starting from a different position in what they've inherited, where the team is located, what tools they have at their disposal.

Obviously finances play a huge role even still in the new agreement, so I don't think you're going to be able to just mimic one team or the other.

Ultimately, imitation -- the Nets aren't trying to be the Thunder. They're in Brooklyn, and they should be playing to that massive advantage that they have.

For us, we're in Oklahoma City, and we have a lot of benefits from being here, and we really lean into those benefits. What some people might see as limitations, we see those as potential strengths.

It's very flattering, but I doubt it's, like, just us. I'm sure there's a lot of other people he's looking at, as we did when we were retooling the team.

**Q. With J-Dub and his surgery, how much did that hinder any development in the off-season, and is there any plan to ease him back in, or is he ready to go?**

SAM PRESTI: So he'll be able to speak more directly to that on Monday, but he's done everything he can possibly do to this point. I actually think -- you were talking about hindering his development. I actually think in some ways, like, it may have expedited his development in some other areas.

Again, this is just how we look at things. If you look at the fact that he wasn't able to do everything he'd normally do, it

wasn't like he's not sitting on his couch staring at his wrist. He's working his tail off. Once we get through camp, we'll see where we are. As with anything, it'll be a collaborative decision as to when he returns. Ultimately, he has to feel comfortable with when that is.

But he's had a great off-season considering the limitation, and hopefully there will be some benefits from that. But we're going to be very mindful of putting him in the best position to be successful when he returns.

**Q. From the top to near the bottom of the roster, these guys are racking up endorsement deals, increased work in the community, global recognition. You talked about Isaiah in the Philippines. How intentional, I guess, is the organization in developing that aspect of their career alongside the game?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, for us, I'd say we want to put those guys in position to have great careers on and off the floor, but I wouldn't limit it just to their outside opportunities. I'd say the biggest thing is we want to prepare them so that they have the opportunity to transition once they're done playing and feel comfortable about the world they're walking into at that point, too.

We talked to them a little bit about that, but most of the guys are -- as they should be, focused on where they are, where their feet are right now. But if guys are benefiting from the recognition, I think our guys for the most part understand all that's coming downstream from the team's success. That's generally where all of the opportunities come from in our industry.

As long as it's not getting in the way of those things, we're incredibly supportive of that, and it's great. It's tremendous. I think we have a lot of guys that are worthy of getting -- they're great personalities, they're good people, and we're super supportive of that.

**Q. You talked about the team continuing to evolve. I'm wondering about Mark in specific. Obviously coached you guys to a championship, but what do you feel like he's looking at to try to improve himself, the staff, and then by extension, the team?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think Mark is emblematic of so much of our organization. He's had such a big influence on us as well.

He's a continuous learner, and he spends a lot of time thinking about ways in which we can get better and ways he can get better. You could speak to him more specifically in that, but like I said before, so much of the things that we were able to accomplish last year, the



foundation for those things were laid in 2021, and we've been able to scale on top of that.

We talked very clearly at the time when he was hired about why he was hired, how we felt he would help us create the kind of play style that could be scaled upon, and would continue to adopt the mentality of discovery. He's done an excellent job with that.

Anytime you're getting to participate in the postseason, you're getting better because you're being faced with such elite competition.

I draw that back to our team as well. I mentioned a few players that we did not have a whole lot of access to last year, but our entire team will come back more well-rounded because of those two months. Every shootaround, every practice, every game, win or loss, every road trip, that is part of our development.

With a young team, it brought us to that point last year.

This year, we can't walk in assuming that all the things that were going well last year are just going to be there. We kind of have to restart ourselves. But that experience both for Mark and the team was extremely valuable, but we're so young as a team that we can't just try to -- I just don't think you can optimize a team in growth. I think you have to remain really open with that team as opposed to starting to try to optimize every square inch of it and let it kind of take shape.

It might be much different than -- this is something I've learned. It might be a lot different than when you may have envisioned, but the real sign of experience is, like, letting go of your initial vision and don't try to control that. Let it go where it's supposed to go. The roots of what it is you've laid. As long as there's integrity to those, from that point, you have to kind of just let it happen and keep shaping it. But it doesn't have to be exactly the way you initially planned it to go.

**Q. When you hired Mark, obviously there's a million decisions he made during the Playoffs --**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, literally a million if you really thought about it, what pants to wear, what shoes to wear, which those add up.

**Q. I'm sure that was the toughest thing.**

SAM PRESTI: That's it. That could tip it over the edge.

**Q. Obviously the highest profile one was the change to the starting lineup in the Playoffs. You've known**

**him obviously at the time you promoted him to head coach. Did you have a sense that he had that type of ability to say, you know what, we need to try this, even in the most high pressure situation that he would probably ever find himself in?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it goes back to what I was saying in the open, which is builders versus guardians. Succeeding versus surviving. I think personality-wise, he's thinking about improving and what can make us better, not thinking about how things could go poorly.

You have to balance both of those, but you can't shy away from opportunities to improve. You want to make sure you're positioned, for instance, in that situation if we didn't get the outcome we were looking for or there were adjustments made by the other team, it wasn't like you couldn't go back to what you had. You know what I'm saying? So you're positioned well. The change in circumstance doesn't dictate your decisions.

So I think he sees that clearly, which is a huge strength of his, and he's willing to walk through those doors.

The challenge, as I've said earlier today, is maintaining that mindset once you've had some level of success, and I think -- I'm not talking about the fact that we happened to be fortunate enough to win the title last year. But once you find a formula, human nature is to fall back on that, and I think ultra competitors are -- their default is to improve and challenge their own standards versus we know this works, what happens if we go away from it.

I go back to the Holmgren decision with bringing Hart on board. We had a heck of a year. Every reason in the world to be like, don't touch that. But we want to be every year coming in figuring out how the team can improve and get better and not just get tied down to what has worked, because the league is too good.

I think the league has become much more improvisational than it has been maybe when I first started where it was a little bit more system oriented, which really highlights the talents of the players differently in my opinion and why different players are more valued today than they might have been in the past.

That's going to change 10 years from now. We're going to see a different set of players that are valued differently than maybe the ones that are valued skill-wise today. That's why I get lost with this whole conversation about comparing the different eras. For that era, you can only work with where the game has gotten to at that point.

If we took Oscar Robertson, and he started individually



training when he was 12 with a personal trainer, think how good that guy would be. If Bill Russell had the benefit of the shoes we used to -- that's not to say that the players of today aren't as good. No. It's just the era in which you're growing through, you do the best with what you've got, and then everyone builds on top of that.

I think the greatness of our players today is very much a function of the greatness of the players previously. I don't see the point in pitting them against each other.

They're really one lineage. That's why the history of the league I think is so important for -- I'm speaking specifically to our fans, because we're 18 years in to an 80-year league, and it's good to have an understanding of how fortunate we are to be a part of this.

But the game itself, there are a lot of things that keep repeating themselves over the course of time, and it's fascinating to see, but a big part of it is the players are so good, they make other players better, future players.

**Q. Shai went to his first All-Star Game, first all-NBA team. This last season we saw the same thing happen with Dub. From your perspective what's next in his development?**

SAM PRESTI: Jalen?

**Q. Yeah.**

SAM PRESTI: Look, the field is so open for both of those players, Shai included. I think to predetermine, like, it needs to be here, it needs to be there, I wouldn't limit them in one area or the other.

The thing about Dub that I think makes him so unique is he's got an engine that runs on both ends of the floor. That's such a huge foundation. It gives him such a high floor as a player.

Then as we've seen with other players here, as time goes on, you start to kind of trim the fat on different areas to become just a more efficient player. But that's a real process. That's not something you can snap your fingers at. You can see during the season when guys are making subtle changes or adjustments, I think we could see that through last year. With our team in general, to be honest with you, because I remember maybe first, early part of the season, offensively we were not what we were the year before. Does everybody remember that? No, I'm not being facetious. It was a long time ago. So we lose sight of the context.

But the beginning of the season last year, people were

very, like, concerned about our offense. But these are the stages that teams go through. That is, like, the beauty of an 82-game season and an approach to improve or discover the team. Through the year, by the end of the year, we found some different things that work for us.

The worst thing for us to do is at the first sign of any type of resistance, we default back to what worked last year. By the end of the year, we found some really good things. We also had some players during the year that weren't playing at their best level -- I wouldn't say their best level because no one can play at their best level all the time. They weren't probably at like sea level.

But that's the sign of a pro, is you work yourself through those things. I think for us as an organization, creating the atmosphere and the environment where we can get those players back on track, getting them playing with small adjustments, it could be just encouragement but it could also be some small technical adjustments that take place, it's a work in progress.

I think that's what makes the game great. Unfortunately, this is not to knock the way we look at the game, but it's so much overreaction and judgment on a game to game basis with no understanding of the human element, of what could be happening within the team, and such an important -- I don't know how you can evaluate what's going on on the court without understanding the dynamic of what's going on off the court, and unfortunately no one is really going to know all those things.

But I think we keep that in mind that people get better as they work through things.

**Q. I know defense isn't always the easiest thing to get better at in the off-season, but I just wonder from what you've seen from Chet and obviously how massive of an impact he's able to have on that end of the floor, what did he take from four different playoff series against four very, very different types of challenges and find a way to attack his continued improvement on that end?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think one of the things to take into consideration is -- and I don't know how many games he played prior to the postseason, but to be able to perform at that level, at that level of competition, because by the time we got to the Indiana series, the level of physicality and competitiveness by both teams was, I think, probably like -- I don't know if those teams can play harder, which is another reason why I think people -- hard-core basketball fans really loved that series, because it was really about the game and the play on the floor, and it wasn't about any theatrics or anything outside of the arena of the



competition, which is really what makes the product what it is and makes it sustainable.

For Chet to be able to kind of like ramp up into that and find his footing to not only play but at times dominate defensively is pretty remarkable.

Coming into this season, we've had time to kind of ramp up again, and we've just got to see where he's at. But the experience is invaluable. His instincts to drive winning are unique, extremely unique, and he's extremely ambitious. But his ambition never crosses over into agenda.

Like we want ambitious players. But you just don't want that ambition to bleed into an agenda, and we have not had that, obviously, because we wouldn't have been able to have the type of success that we've had if that was the case.

But he's a unique player. I'm really excited to see him continue to grow. But what makes Chet who he is isn't statistics. It isn't highlight plays. It's the things that connect the team to winning, and he has this instinctual ability to do that, and I saw that when he was a junior in high school at USA Basketball. He's been doing the same things.

So we're very fortunate that we have him, and I think he'll only be better. But I think he'll be a different player because a young player like that is always changing.

**Q. When you hear all the potential dynasty talk about this team --**

SAM PRESTI: I think you guys probably know what I'm going to say about this.

I think every team that's probably won in the last six, seven years, the same things are said about them at that time. I don't know this for a fact, but I bet we could go back and dig up some articles or some tweets or some things that are all talking about every one of these teams is going to -- is on the verge of X, which is what we do as a society right now. I'm not blaming anybody, it's just where we're at.

But I find it a little confusing because in one sense, people are talking about that, that we're on the verge of a dynasty, and then other people are saying we won't be able to keep the team together because of the rules. So it's so dissident that you can't take either one of them seriously.

It's similar to when we had with our draft picks, we had too many draft picks, too many. We had to get rid of them, like dumping them overboard immediately, or we had to consolidate all of them and trade for a star, which of course

we wouldn't know who else we had on our team if we had done that, and if people think that the team is going to struggle to stay together now, imagine if we had taken all our draft picks together and traded them for a star. That would be a real double whammy, right?

Then you also talk about the draft picks, and people are saying, well, but the draft picks are going to be the thing that's going to help them avoid the second apron issues, right? So I don't know what to think. I know I don't know the answer to any of those things. I definitely don't think talking about dynasties or things like that -- we have so many things we have to get better at. The west is so tough. We just have a good training camp. If we have a good training camp, and we have to be able to separate ourselves and show discipline, maturity, and humility to be able to put our best foot forward and respect this season, because we don't take anything with us from last year at all. We have to kind of go back to zero and have the humility to do the same mundane things again.

It sounds trite, but I think it's our best way forward.

**Q. The fact that now you're the defending champs, everybody is loading up, and just putting that moniker on your chest. Talk about that you're going to be faced with that for 41 games in a row --**

SAM PRESTI: What do I think about that? I mean, insofar as the teams getting better, that's what happens in the league. Everybody is striving to get better. As I said earlier, the Western Conference is -- I think 23 out of 25 seasons has dominated the Eastern Conference, and the caliber of the teams in the Playoffs that the Western Conference is seeing in the second round, third round, they're just significantly different. They're like a series ahead relative to the level of competition in the west versus the east recently.

It goes back to me -- it's like, that's competition. Everybody is going to get ready to play however they're going to play, but it really pretty much comes down to our preparation, the things we're prioritizing, the areas we need to get better at, how other teams see us or approach us will only matter if we allow that to influence our point of view on what we're trying to accomplish.

But I have a lot of confidence that the guys understand how we've found success in the past. I also think one of the best things that's happened for our team given our young it is is that we play in the west because I think it's accelerated our development, especially in those early years, the 24-win years or whatever that was.

We were only unsuccessful -- a really unsuccessful team



for two seasons, but those two seasons we had to get better because we played in the west. We were playing against great competition and it accelerated us. We weren't playing against teams that -- there weren't many teams that young or that level.

So I think in a lot of ways, the conference competition has made us better, and I think it will do the same thing even now that we're a contending team. I think it makes us better. We have to welcome that, not see it as any type of threat.

I think it's more a great opportunity we get to play against these great teams, and we're certainly not thinking that we're ahead of them or better than them. We have to play the season. We'll have to find that out. Hopefully we will be.

**Q. Is that part evolving, part of (indiscernible)?**

SAM PRESTI: I just think we've taken that approach every year. I know it sounds like I'm repeating myself, but I really do feel very strongly that the outcome of last season, we're not reacting to that. Like that's not changing our approach to this season because we didn't walk into last season trying to create an outcome. We're really, just like every other year, trying to stack, get better, learn about the team, put the team in positions to be successful, and to change that point of view simply because of the way the season went and become defensive or, as I said before, building versus guarding, builders versus guardians, we're looking ahead.

So that's kind of always the way we've done it. I think it's the healthiest way for our team to do it. It's how we've done it, and we're not looking for a ton of outside motivation because that's pretty hollow; know what I mean? It's very shallow, and you can't go anywhere with that. I think it's better for us to just stick to the approach we've had for a really long time.

**Q. Similar question that you might have just answered, but you mentioned turning the page quite a few times in your opening statement. How do you balance that with balancing and realizing that you guys are champs and teams are chasing you and impressing that on the team?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we won the championship last year. So we don't know -- this season is a new season. We have to reset ourselves and have the humility to approach it in that fashion.

We won 68 games. We don't get to bring 12 of those with us. We start at zero, and we have to start stacking,

chasing improvement. With confidence. Teams should be confident. They've gathered a lot of experience. We have a lot of continuity. Those things matter.

But it goes back to what we said at the beginning of last year. People talk about expectations all the time. The problem with that is the word "expect," as if something is given to you or it's going to fall into place.

If we asked people last year what their expectations were at the beginning of the year and then once Chet took that injury, people would completely change their expectations, right, because what they expected didn't take place.

So we've always reframed that as possibilities. We have a ton of possibilities. We should be confident that a lot of them are good. But it's not going to be handed to us, and it's certainly not going to happen easily because the stats support that relative to teams that have won the previous championship.

I don't have answers as to why that's the case, but I do believe we understand the way in which we've worked to get improvement, and that's really the only thing we can put our heart into.

**Q. I don't recall over the years watching the NBA a championship team be so connected with its G-League team. I wonder, obviously your coach came up from a G-League team, you've got many players who built themselves up through the G-League. You probably don't win it without that affiliation. How critical has that been, and how critical do you see that be going forward?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, that relationship has been extremely strong. We were one of the early, early entrants into the G-League, I think one of the First Four teams maybe. I might be wrong about that. And it's that the Blue has taken on a lot of different evolutions in our time here.

But I mean, we're probably close to 40 percent of our staff has spent time with the blue. That's just because the organization is very connected in that fashion. It's how we've done everything. I think it's been a great development, resource for our staff as well as our players themselves.

Mark starting with -- like Nate Tibbetts did a great job for us, and Darko is obviously coaching in Toronto now; obviously Mark had a great run there. Grant Gibbs is now a great assistant coach for us, Kam Woods, and now Daniel Dixon, so all these people have been huge contributors to that program, and it will continue to be important for us.



I think every team is seeing that now. I don't think it's novel. I think most teams are operating in that fashion, as it should be, and I think it's a great -- when you talked about big advancements for the league, I left that out. I should have talked about that. The G-League is a massive accelerator for the NBA. It's a huge component to the development of young players and so many of the great players today have played down there.

**Q. Chris Paul has indicated he's going to retire after this season. Your thoughts on his impact on the Thunder and Oklahoma City basketball?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, that's a great question. Chris, you hear a lot about players, but until you work with them, sometimes you just don't -- you see them, you understand their greatness, but once you get to work with somebody, you understand the why behind it. He's definitely one of those guys for me.

I'm trying to learn from everybody, but certainly from our players because they are such unique people and have such unique skills.

Working with Chris was great because you get to see that mind working every day and his level of detail and preparation. I'm grateful because when we traded for him, it was a surprise to him, but he put two feet in here. We do not have that season, which was the equivalent of a 50-win season, without his full commitment to the team. He was essential to that season, and we don't take 50-win seasons for granted here. That was a fun year.

I think a lot of times people associate our pivoting of the team to when we traded Paul George, but people forget that -- and we traded Russell. But people forget that the following year we won 50 games and were the fifth seed or fourth seed, we went to seven games against Houston that season.

Then following that we had the two years where we were retooling the team and got to the play-in the following year.

But when we made that decision to start to reposition, replenish and rebuild, CP kept us going for another year. I have so much respect for him because of that.

**Q. Shai obviously had a historic season last year. What's impressed you about the way he's approached the off-season as he's looking towards this next year?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, it comes down to consistency. His humility to look at himself as a player, honestly, and figure out where it is that he can improve.

I've said this before: I think the elite players are secure players. The security of a great player is for them to not just see everybody else's limitations or faults or how they're failing to support them. They're able to see themselves clearly, and as a result of that, they can get better. They're generally never keeping score on their teammates.

That's, I think, one of the reasons why, not only has he emerged as a great player, but he has emerged as a great leader, and a big part of that is his own security in himself and willingness to see himself and take the responsibility for elevating those around him as opposed to keeping score and expecting them to serve him and elevate him solely.

That's not what a team is. I said that in the opening comments, that the signature of individual greatness in a team sport is the ability to elevate others beyond their natural capabilities, and I think he's done that. People play better with him.

You go back -- I hate to sound like a history lesson here, but look at the great players over the course of 80 years, and there's a difference between the great players and the great talents, and the great players are always elevating their teams and people are playing better with them. I think that's -- to me, he's on an unbelievable track that way.

But it's a journey for him. That's what I love about Shai, is he's on kind of like an endless pursuit of how good he can be. You've got to let somebody like that wander a little bit in my opinion so that they can find it. Sometimes they'll come up empty in certain situations. But I have so much trust in him, like as a person, that he'll find his way to where he needs to be, and that's to me when you have a great player like that, it gives you, like, a lot of confidence.

**Q. I'll leave this open-ended, but as a guy who's been in the league a long time, seen a lot, anything you'd like to say on the allegations against the Clippers?**

SAM PRESTI: Look, I thought I might get asked this, and I understand the question, but I really don't feel comfortable talking about that. I just don't want to comment on that.

**Q. Last year you didn't get a big sample size with Chet and Hartenstein in the regular season. You got to see it in the Playoffs. Did you gain enough knowledge to know what that looks like, or is there still room for --**

SAM PRESTI: Of course I think it's a great question. I think it just goes back to, for us, we're always -- I don't know if it's experimenting because that sounds a little bit reckless, but we're always searching. How's that? We're



always searching within the team.

We haven't seen very much of that in the regular season. I can't remember the number of games, but it's like -- it may be less than 30 games. I said it earlier.

Then when we've seen it, it's been against the same opponent every night, right, so they're playing you a certain way. So you might even say that we count that as like one opponent, one game, because they're playing you a certain way. You make adjustments and things of that nature. But we need to see more of that.

Now, I'm sure on Monday you'll ask Mark about the starting lineup because that's an annual daily question for the coach, and I'm not sure what he'll say because we don't talk about who he's starting, who he's not starting, primarily because everything is so fluid with us, and that's how we've found different combinations. We've created more flexible ways to win. I think we've tried to create a deeper team that way.

I don't know what we'll do, but I'd imagine we'll continue to look at a lot of different things. That lineup has been pretty good for us, but the continuity of that needs time, especially because Chet is taking on a new job on the floor there.

I think it's been promising, but it's still relatively undiscovered.

**Q. You talked earlier about the extensions with Chet and J-Dub and Shai. What goes into planning or managing how expensive this roster can be?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, you know, a couple things on this. If you look at -- the way to look at this, I think, initially relative to those three players you talked about is the aggregate percentage of the cap that they're assuming, so this season it would be in the bottom 10 in the league in terms of if you took three players from each team and you see the percentage of the cap.

Next season, roughly, we'll be up in the top 10, but we're not going to be anywhere near the top 5; know what I mean?

Teams pay three players pretty regularly, but the most highly compensated players on each team are not necessarily making the same amount of money. Just start there. We're not in some realm where committing dollars to those three guys is taking you outside any type of norm. You're going to end up toward the high end, but you're not in some type of outlier territory.

I think you used the right word, "expensive." I think the issue for us coming is -- people talk about the CBA and the second apron has become so engrained in our NBA vocabulary so quickly. But there's nothing relative to the second apron that would prohibit us from keeping anyone on our team.

The rules themselves are not prohibitive to our ability to maintain the team. The challenge is obviously for every team that has a sufficient collection of talent is the finances that come with that.

Now, as I said, I think, last year, we don't get into -- and we've had three years, if you count the play-in year, I'd say where we were a good team, two years where we were a contending team, we have not been a taxpayer. We're positioned this year to be a non-taxpayer.

Assuming we're a contending team this year, that would be three years as a non-taxpayer as a contender. People talk all the time about the fact that these -- the windows are shorter and they're saying there's three years with each team more or less with the new rules. We just had three, or we've had two, we're going on three.

We don't know how this year is going to go, what chapter 18 will be, but we certainly can say with confidence that we are a contending team but we've got a lot of work to do.

From there, things will get more expensive because of those changes in those three guys' contracts. But we won't hit any type of repeater penalties until we're in another CBA. We'll be in a new arena by the time we're hitting any repeater tax penalties, as long as we stay under this year.

Simultaneously, we are at a point where there will be some significant financial benefits for our team going forward as a result of things happening kind of outside of the team itself. You have a brand new television contract that was just signed, which is a remarkable achievement and sign of the strength of the product. That benefits all teams.

You have a new arena opening, which will be a significant driver in revenue for our organization. You have potential expansion down the line, both in Europe and potentially domestically. Obviously that's a decision that Adam and the Board of Governors are reviewing presently.

So we're positioned well to have a significant influx of capital going forward, during a period of time where for sure our team is going to get more expensive.

It's rare that you have a team like ours bring back every player more or less, right? So over the course of time, whether or not you have aprons, taxes or what have you,

teams change.

We have a very unique situation because everybody is back to a team that had tremendous success. But going forward, that's just natural, that there will be some changes. Part of it is players. Players have options. So when they become free agents, they have choices.

We might want to keep specific players. They may have better opportunities other places.

All that to say, we understand what's coming, but it would be really fruitless for us to predict what's going to happen because we'd be missing the most important information, which is this season. What happens this season, what happens next season.

But our ownership group is fiercely committed to supporting the team, as we talked about, the mutual commitment component to a small market franchise. I think it's extremely important that everyone is mutually committed and everybody understands this is coming.

We knew five years ago when we repositioned and replenished that team that if we were to ever get back to the postseason or exceed past being just an average playoff team, we would need the resources to support that. We saw that during the first mountain.

So this isn't our first look at this. There's been ample time for us to plan for this, and then we have the benefits of some outside resources that should aid us.

But we're still going to have to be strategic and make smart decisions when we have all the information.

**Q. You've had uncanny roster stability in the last three or four years, and this year as you mentioned the apex, everybody is back. Are there any down sides to that?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, let us lose four or five games and you guys will come up with them; let's be honest.

I see way more upside than I see negatives. A couple reasons for that. Basketball is a game that is played instinctively, and when it's at it's best it's played improvisationally, as I said earlier.

In order to play improvisationally, the other people playing with you have to be able to anticipate what it is you're about to do or react effectively to those choices because that's the best -- it's like the book *The Art of War*. Everything boils back down to surprise and that type of thing when you're in competition.

Continuity allows for people to play better together and anticipate things. That's tactically. I think a team dynamic also benefits from continuity as well because over 17 years here, we have had a couple interesting personalities over the course of time, and those of us that have been with those people can pretty much tell you when that's going to happen and when they're going to come out of it and how that's going to work through continuity.

But if you were to just be introduced to that for the first time, you might be like, what in the world is going on here. But that's part of continuity as well is the guys understand each other, they know how to play off of each other, they know how to pick each other up.

One big challenge for us, like I said in the open, every team has a passage. They have something that they've got to focus on and get through. That's just the next thing up for them to improve on as a team. That's every team in the league. You could go -- the team that finished with the worst record in the league, they have something that's the next thing up for them to grow as a team.

For us, one of those things will be if we hit a lull during the year, the ability to play through that, get the car back on the tracks, the train back on the tracks, through nothing more than persistence, like being able to understand where the issues are, plow through that.

I really think the Warriors are an incredible example of this. They're one of the most successful franchises in the last 10 years probably. But they play through lulls at different times, and they're remarkable. I have so much respect for them. They find a way to get themselves through tough patches and out to optimal levels.

That will be a passage for us when we get to that, when we have to work through those things. I think continuity will help that, and then also -- I understood the value of continuity from watching Ginobili's Argentinian national teams over the years, because those guys play together from when they're like 10 years old. You want to talk about a team that we all know as humans when we're watching basketball, every one of us can say this, when a team is playing together and in sync and the ball has energy, everybody feels better. It makes you feel good when you see that, when the ball pings around and you know where it's going to end up and you know the guy is going to make the shot because he's in such rhythm and the team is so connected.

People, our fans particularly, I think they get joy out of that, and that's a beautiful thing. I think continuity helps breed that. You can build that through the year for sure; know what I mean? But for us, I think the benefit is we know we



can access that at different times. We can't live there, but continuity helps you access it maybe a little bit easier, and as we go forward with some of the questions that riled me up, that's going to be a challenge for us.

But I don't think you'll see huge turnover. There will probably be some changes, but that's natural for every team, and sometimes you do need that. I would agree with that.

But coming off the year we had and the ability to keep everybody without going above our tax threshold, a big part of that is guys wanting to be here and our ability to get some of these things done. Never underestimate that. That's the mutual aspect of this entire project for us.

**Q. You've talked about your connection with the city and the state and all that stuff. How much does that roster construction help that, guys like Kenrich and Aaron Wiggins? Everybody thinks they know them and they've known them forever?**

SAM PRESTI: Look, I agree with that, but if you go back to the first mountain, I think you'd find similar relationships with, like, Sefolosa or Perk for sure, Collison. Royal Ivey is a guy that -- I actually took a picture of this one night. Someone was wearing a Royal Ivey jersey. This was two years ago or so. I took a picture and sent it to him.

So that's one of the great things, I think, about playing here. There's 80 years of NBA history. The Celtics, the Knicks, the Sixers, the Warriors, some of these teams have had long, long histories and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of players.

We have a team, and we have had continuity on both mountains, pretty significant continuity both times. So there hasn't been necessarily a turnstile of personnel through here. There has been a lot of players, but I do think the ability to be one of the first through the door as a player in a community like this, you can have a significant impact.

I think Hartenstein is a great example of this. He did another court dedication yesterday. No matter -- he could play here for 10 more years. People are going to remember him as a great player but also a huge community ambassador, for somebody that was new to the city.

So you have these impacts in this type of market with a very, very young organization, even though I know almost 20 years, but if you stack that up, we're pretty new.

This region obviously has had the Mavericks, and believe it

or not, I'm ashamed to say this, but I didn't realize, even in 1984, Kansas City had a team with notable players. But this is new for this community, and I think the guys have a chance to leave a legacy here irrespective of if they're somebody that's going to have All-Star teams and all-NBA appearances to their resume.

**Q. What are your thoughts on the new national team?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, the first thing, it's really good for us, for the reasons we talked about earlier relative to the input that -- the financial input that it gives to our team. I also think -- well, one thing I'd say is I know Adam was quoted the other day -- I should say probably misquoted the other day, about his comment about it being a highlight league.

I know him. I've been in a lot of meetings with him at this point. That's not how he's thinking; know what I mean?

Maybe taken out of context of something, but I know that's not what he's thinking. I do think with ABC -- sorry, NBC and Amazon, like, that's just more opportunity for the game to get seen by more people, and that's only good for the health of the league.

Back to the highlight thing, like, for us to improve our youth players in the United States, really anywhere because of the way it's global now, the worst thing for us would be for kids growing up to watch highlights as a means to understand the game.

The best thing for us is for people to watch the game itself and have people that can help explain what makes these players so great or the finer points of the game.

You want to talk about player development? The way we present our game to our fans is a huge aspect to the future of player development because we can't grow a generation of young players that don't see the connecting parts of what makes a really good player or a really good team, and having the right people to be able to explain that I think is a huge opportunity.

There's room for everything. There's room for criticism, an overindulgence on transactions and all the things that I think people have probably OD'd on at this point, but there's still a place for that, but a balance of understanding and celebrating what makes the game unique and different, how a player is getting open, what help-side defense is, all of these aspects.

We can't have a whole generation of players growing up thinking that the game is played behind the three-point line, which it's not, although some people will have you think

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that, or the game is just played at 11, 12 feet, which it's not. What's happening in order for the player to get access to the basket and get to 11, 12 feet?

I think we can -- those partners can really do something to help the game itself and grow a whole new generation of fan that can appreciate and understand what goes into high-level basketball. I see that as the biggest opportunity.

**Q. You mentioned that everyone in the organization contributes to winning; talked about them. Can you speak to Acie Laws' contributions to teams and what it's like to see him back in...**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, he would sit next to me in these post-draft and stuff like that, and I think he's got an extremely bright future. I remember I saw him play one of the greatest college basketball games. It was against Texas. I was at the game because I was still working in San Antonio. Every time I see him, I always remember how great that game was.

But a class act, a professional, and he'll help Brooklyn significantly. I'm excited to see how he does with them.

**Q. You mentioned in your opening statement the fact that the replay center is the greatest improvement to game flow since the shot clock. Can you expand on that?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think it can be. I think instant replay has been a great thing for the league. Obviously there's things that we're working through on that relative to how long some of these reviews take. But the vision that Adam and Evan Wasch and others have for the replay center to be able to service every game every night and take the more objective calls off the plate of our officials -- because we have incredible officials. They're elite. But the thing that makes them elite is their judgment.

Some of these things that I think our league office wants to try to make -- automate and make easier are these kind of out of bounds -- these things that can go quicker with less of a review, and they're making a change this year where some of these out of bounds calls are going to be made in the center itself, in addition to potential potentially a proximate foul calls will be made from the center as well. So it's a slow stage. You can never substitute the value of the personal official on the court that has relationships with the players and the coaches and has a sense and a feel for the game.

But you go back to the 24-second shot clock in '54, I think it was the owner of the Syracuse franchise at the time, the league was struggling because these games were being

played like 17-18, and the games -- and people were just like tuning -- not tuning out because they weren't watching on TV at that time, but they were opting out.

The league had a big issue on their hands, and through the pushing of this one owner, I think his name was Danny Biasone, he convinced the league we have to go 24 seconds, and when they did, everything changed and people were coming in droves.

We would not be sitting here if they didn't put that clock in in '54. The game couldn't have gone further. People didn't want to watch that.

We're obviously so far ahead of that right now. Now we're just trying to make it a little faster. I don't think anybody is to that level. I hope not.

But if we can improve that a little bit, make the game run a little smoother, not take anything out of the hands of the officials that make them the greatest in the world but speed it up, I think it will help the game tremendously.

But that's going to take an investment from all of our teams to increase the breadth and the resources at that center in Secaucus.

**Q. You talked about some of the changes that have happened over the course of the NBA. One of them is the NBA Cup. We've seen it now for a few years. What do you think of it now that we've experienced it, and also in particular the (indiscernible) in January of a kind of shortened schedule or maxed-out schedule?**

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a work in progress. I think there will be some changes in the future to where the games are played and the semifinals, which I think will be helpful.

Again, though, we have to -- if we want to get where we want to go and continue to grow a whole new generation of fans, it may not connect with everybody right now. But I kind of -- the way we've always looked at it is like, if this is what's in the best service of the game, and we can still compete in a way that is, like -- what's the right word?

We're not messing with the league or the game or the competition to the degree that it takes the integrity of the entire competition away, then I think we have to be open to these changes and trust the vision that Adam has.

Same thing with Europe. We have to follow that. It may seem very abstract or obscure at the time, but if that's where it is that we need to be -- as long as we don't forget that the product of the game -- back to the question Paris asked, the quality of the game, the history of the game



doesn't get compromised for the commercial aspirations of the game, because that will really hurt us. That's the one thing that's been the through line. I think you go with it.

Now, I can't get asked a question about the Cup without raising the fact that we did go on a week-long West Coast road trip and flew over three time zones to Florida to play a back to back. So that's one of those things where we miss that. We have to own that as a league.

To the credit of our players, when we talk about resting and load management and things of that nature. Like our guys played those games, but you're never going to find a schedule that goes a week on the West Coast and then a back to back on the East Coast.

But you have some tolerance for the league to work through that stuff. No one is ever going to have to do that again. Fortunately for us, we took that on as a challenge. We ripped off a ton of wins in a row. And I think it made us a better team.

But certainly we wouldn't want to make that, like, a normal thing, but I think the goal is clear, and I think it can help the colleague, but we have to be open-minded.

**Q. Sam, Lu is coming his first (indiscernible.) I just wanted to ask about his outlier development coming from Summer League to the G-League to being second on the team in scoring?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, he's a great -- I don't want to say it's a great story. The path is something that's really great. O.

Ne thing I want to say about this, because I talked about this probably four years ago, when we were getting our teeth kicked in and losing a lot of those games for those two seasons, Lu was making what we were calling catalyst plays.

Like we might be down by 15 points in the second half, and we'd be outmatched at times, just purely based on the age of the team and where we were, but he'd be diving on the floor, harassing somebody up the court.

We talked about whenever it is, and we had no idea when, but eventually we were going to be able to win some games, it was going to be that kind of approach that sustained us or got us to the point where we could be a respectable team and ultimately a competitive team.

That to me is what stands out about Lu is the things we've seen from him in the biggest stages. He was doing those things when there wasn't a ton of incentive to do it, and that's to me why he's a huge component to the heartbeat of

the team, because he's done those things irrespective of the conditions in which he was playing, and I have a lot of respect for that.

I have a huge respect for the fact that in order for us to become an elite team, I talked about this in the open as well, you have to create space for others, and I think Lu's willingness to pull back in certain areas has made him more efficient and has allowed the team to be more potent.

That takes such humility, and you also have to be a colossal competitor to do that. I'm really proud of him because he's shown so much growth as a player, but he has understood and he's placed the winning first.

I just can't say enough good things about that.

**Q. Another rookie, Thomas Sorber, got injured and couldn't play the whole season. Can you tell us your thoughts on that, and also is there anything you had to kind of like consider in terms of the team construction?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, first, obviously super disappointed for Thomas because he spent the whole summer getting himself back and was playing great. He was playing 5-on-5, was anxiously waiting for the rest of the team to show up. It's a really tough situation.

But he's got the right mindset. He's got great energy, natural energy, and buoyancy. We're bringing back the majority of the team, but there are some new personalities and things of that nature. He's got a great energy to him just as a person.

That's going to really help him through this. He also has the benefit of a couple players that have been in this situation before, Chet and Nikola. So he's going to get something out of this year, 100 percent. I think it will position him well going into next season.

But certainly disappointing, especially because he had gotten himself to the point where he was playing and playing well.

The next part about the roster construction, sometimes we don't -- I don't think we talk enough about Brandon Carlson. He was pretty integral to our team last season. He played in some big games. He stepped up in some really big games. Again, in terms of, like, elevating people, I thought if you watched the lineups he was in, some of our lead handlers showed a lot of trust in him, and he delivered.

I think he's got a bright future, so having him with the group



is great. JWill has only gotten better every year he's been here. We played Kenrich at the 5, and obviously we have Chet and Hart.

I think we'll be good, but we also don't have a ton of flexibility to go out and do something, but we're not -- we don't feel the need to do that right now.

**Q. You mentioned the new arena a few minutes ago. I don't know how involved you were with planning, but what are your early impressions of what you've seen?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I've been very fortunate to be at the very core of that process, and I've learned so much. It's been really, really interesting to me.

I just think in general, I'm fascinated by building anything, building things, so this was a great thing for me.

There's governmental aspects to this that are way over my head, but I'm learning how all of these types of things work.

I think the most important thing is the quality, and that's something that is really important for us is that people can open these buildings, but shortly thereafter, things start to deteriorate, or you can see where things were shortcut.

I just think the commitment that Mayor Holt and certainly our organization, saying we want to have something that's lasting, that serves with the community. I think the park aspect of that is absolutely essential because nature and our ability to continue to create natural resources and build a downtown that is not just concrete but has all kinds of nature connecting these different aspects that are already existing.

So major credit to the city planners and the people that through maps and other private investments with the Myriad Gardens, Scissortail. We have such a unique opportunity to have some natural parks and beauty surrounding the arena, and the arena is amplified by its surroundings.

It should be something that people can access and use irrespective of if the Thunder are playing or in season. I think that's such a huge opportunity for us to help keep giving back to the city, giving back and trying to build it.

Then someone is going to come after we finish our project and they're going to build upon that, and that's how this particular community has gotten itself to the level that it has.

I'm really excited about it. We have a team of people that are working on that every day. But to see it from where it

was to where it is now is fascinating, and it's a community asset, and we're going to try everything we can to make sure that it serves the community in more ways than just being a nod to the tradition of competition in Oklahoma.

**Q. Speaking of downtown development, Russell has gotten involved, it sounds like, with the development of soccer that's going to happen over there. What does that mean to you, to have a guy that was here, now not, but still wanting to be involved?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, it's just evolution. Myron used that word earlier, like the evolution of our franchise, the evolution of our organization. Sports in a small market like this transcends in a lot of ways, and I think the players have such great opportunity to have influence and impact, because of the mindset of the city and its aspirations, the thought leaders in the city and their aspirations, but also because of the fact that we're only 18 years in.

So it's a very fertile ground for our athletes to take on roles after they play, even if they're not calling this their home.

It just makes you feel like -- Russell obviously had a good experience here and wants to be part of that. I'm really, really happy about that. I think it's smart for whoever -- for the people that are doing that to have him involved.

But it will set him up well for other probably endeavors like this whenever he finishes playing.

**Q. You've talked a lot about moving past last season. There's still the opening night, banner, rings, all that that comes with it, the opponent they gave you. Have you thought about what that's going to look like and feel like for you and the team and the city?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, again, I don't want to -- I want to be clear, I'm not saying we shouldn't be proud of what we accomplished or we can't look backwards. It's strictly if we want to capitalize on the season, we have to turn the page competitively. Not emotionally for our fans; they'll have that forever. But we need to do that to get better.

I'm sure it will be a great evening. We've seen these before. There's one of these every year. Extremely fortunate for us to be able to take part in that.

I think everyone will be really excited.

At the same time, if you're going to ask the people in this building, we have a hell of a team that we have to play against on that night.

So all systems are going to be focused on continuing to go

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out and perform and execute to see where we are when we're playing against a great Western Conference team, and that will be kind of the launch point to see kind of how we can improve from there.

There will be two sides of that. We're going to need our fans like we have had them in the postseason last year to carry as much of that enthusiasm and just being there, standing up, encouraging our players and responding to their effort, and like I said before, their energy. That's going to be really important.

Also, it's a huge factor in our ability to get stops at certain times or find extra levels of resilience at different times. Our fans have been great.

If we can maintain that through some of the regular season, that would be tremendous, and I think our guys would be ecstatic about that.

#### **Q. How did the reading go this summer?**

SAM PRESTI: You know, I knew I'd get this question. I want to use this as an opportunity to clarify that I'm no, like, librarian or Reader's Digest critic at all. A lot of times I dabble -- I used to read and feel so committed to the book that even if I didn't like it, I would try to finish it. I know some of you are like that out there. But let me tell you, there's another way. There's a path out of that. (Laughter).

It's basically be a dabbler. I dabble a lot. I go back and read things I've read previously. Sometimes I read it differently when I see it. I don't want to give this impression that I'm like this speed reader or anything like that. Quite the contrary. Anybody that knew me in high school would definitely know I was no speed reader. I wasn't much of a reader at all.

But things I've read, been toying with. Have you read the science of hitting by Ted Williams? Incredible book.

Then I got made aware of Joan Didion, the author Joan Didion. I read the White Album and I loved that book -- I found myself laughing out loud at that book, just the way she could write. It was like so illustrative and at times cynical and hilarious. I could see, like, the greatness. I got it, and I'm not like a great historian of writing. But I could go, wow, I get it, this person is really -- she's capturing that time frame. That's pretty special.

You kind of understand -- she makes you feel like you're there, and I can feel that.

A Sense of Where You Are is a book by John McPhee

about one of Bill Bradley's seasons at Princeton. The title to that -- I didn't understand the title of that book, but it's in an expression in which Bradley is describing his physical and emotional experience playing the game.

When I read that passage and it hit me, I didn't understand what the title meant until I read it, and it was just so -- it really resonated with me because it's mostly about, like, spatial awareness and feeling within the basketball game of like where your body is. I really believe in a lot of that. So much of it's not technical.

Then I read -- it's a book by a French architect called -- I'm going to butcher the name, but I think it's Le Corbusier. I read a book, it was a biography of his; it's called Toward a New Architecture, and they kept referencing this book, so I checked this book out. I really liked it. Fascinating architect just in terms of his style and how it shaped that period of time. So I got a lot out of that.

Those would be like the main ones I've been toying with. Now with the scouting season coming up, I'll be on a lot of planes, so that's really when I start to do more reading and I'll find some things and see where that takes me.

#### **Q. You mentioned the Bill Bradley book. Are there other basketball books that you'd recommend?**

SAM PRESTI: You know what's really funny -- I keep everybody in here longer. You know that's the cue, right? Are you new around here? (Laughter).

Everybody else had closed their computers. Joe has had his computer closed for the last 15 minutes but I'm not going to say anything about it.

I don't really read that much about sports. Earlier I did. I read all kinds of things about sports. Now I'm not as -- I just don't read that much.

Bradley is fascinating because he wrote that book Values of the Game that I read when I was in high school, and it just means the world to me. I love that book. The author is a guy named John McPhee, who wrote The Headmaster, which is about -- he's a headmaster of a private school around where I grew up. So yeah, it was kind of fascinated, but the writer is really highly regarded, and I liked to check that out.

But yeah, I haven't done a ton with specific basketball -- I've got to think about that. I got a book on the triple post offense at a -- it must have been like a garage sale or something like that. Oh, you know what? I know where I got this book. When I was an intern with the Spurs, one of my jobs was -- he's going to love this, by the way. Was to

learn the CBA, I would go to RC Buford's house, and he's cleaning his garage, and I would fire questions at him about the CBA, and the way it would teach me is I had to figure out how to ask the question. So it's like, here's the legal document, how to phrase it in a way that made it so that I would know what it meant so I could quiz him on what it was, and he was cleaning out his garage, and he had this triple post offense book by text winter, and he must have got it at a garage sale or something. So that was great.

But I'll think about that. Maybe the next time I'll have some things like that that will resonate.

**Q. If you want another McPhee book, Levels of the Game --**

SAM PRESTI: That's the tennis one, right, where he has to go back -- it's not recorded, so he has to go back and watch -- they're about to erase the film, it's like a major network, that they had to show the tennis match but they're like, he wants to write this whole thing, and there's a book called draft No. 4, which is all about his writing style, I guess. I've read some of that and then it got me like -- I'm not a writer, so it made it harder.

But he essentially was like, I want to write about these two different people, right, and his whole system of writing. But he had to get the game film. They called and they were going to erase it. They're like, we're just about to erase it. He wasn't there, but he wrote the whole thing off of it, I think. I have it. I've got to read it. Maybe that's the next plane ride.

Thank you guys so much. Appreciate it. Hopefully we'll have an exciting year, and we really appreciate everything you do for the team and covering the team.

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