

Oklahoma City Thunder

Media Conference

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Alex Caruso

Press Conference



Q. Alex, what was summer like for you, just traveling with the trophy, taking it back to College Station and the celebration of that?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, that was really cool. I didn't get the chance to do that the first time just because of where we were as a world with COVID and everything else that was going on. So that was fun to be able to go back and share it with some people that have seen me kind of ascend to that pinnacle of this profession through the years.

It was a lot of fun. Yeah, quick couple days, and then kind of just continued on with my summer.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Chet. He's dealt with some major injuries that maybe have delayed part of his development, but still saw the impact that he could have. What are some of the areas that you think he could reach kind of the next level?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah. I mean I think just through time, experience is the greatest teacher. So to be able to just be out there and get, like you said, live reps. And the inconsistency I think of timing with the injuries, too. It's, like, he's playing a little bit and then he gets -- he had the first one -- or before his first year he had the first one and then played for a little bit and then had the second one.

Just getting that rhythm back, I think, was really impressive for him just to be able to not play all of last year, basically, and then come into towards the end of the year and try and get back in shape, try and get the timing down.

So I think the more comfortable he gets, just continuing to find his rhythm and find the flow of basketball that comes naturally to him will be great. And hopefully this season those reps and that experience will continue to just help him develop.

Q. You've been a defending champ before. I can't remember if you won in Chicago --

ALEX CARUSO: No. We had one more year in LA. It was forgettable. That's why you don't remember.

Q. The point is you've been a defending champion before. Now you guys, in your locker room, have before. Is that something you talk about or being as you guys are an uncommon group?

ALEX CARUSO: I mean being uncommon is being aware and self aware. I think if we didn't acknowledge that it will be a little different this year you'd be probably a little naive and put yourself behind the 8 ball.

But, yeah, playing with a target on your back this year, I think there was a lot of times last year even through our dominance through the regular season that people kind of overlooked it and were just, like, all right, let's wait and see how it pans out when it matters.

I think proving it in the playoffs and winning the championship solidifies that a little bit, at least in the basketball community, as far as like how you prepare for somebody, maybe the respect you give them on any given night.

So that will be different regardless of we want it to be the same or normal. Like, our routine won't change, but we have to have the self awareness and acknowledge that playing with the target on your pack as the defending champions is different.

Q. You mentioned the basketball community. I wanted to ask you, you have the most nicknames of anybody on this team in basketball reference, seven. How many can you name?

ALEX CARUSO: They actually just did it two stations ago. So I could probably name all of that. They asked me the favorite one, I think Caruso is probably the favorite one. Do you want me to go through all of them?

Q. No, no. You're fine.

ALEX CARUSO: I did it three stations ago -- Caruso, Accountant, Bald Mamba, White Mamba 2.0 -- how many is that?

Q. I think four.

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ALEX CARUSO: Maybe I can't name all seven. Which ones am I missing?

Q. Bald Eagle.

ALEX CARUSO: Bald Eagle.

Q. Goat and AC. Just the easy one.

ALEX CARUSO: That one doesn't count. Six -- four out of six is pretty good.

Q. You talked about you being the only one who's had a championship season after winning one. Is there anything you can take away from that season after you guys won over in Los Angeles and apply it here?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah it's kind of difficult, too, because that year after was so -- it was so different than I think of how we're entering this season. The only similarities really are, like, how short of a time period we had to get back to it.

But that second year I was in LA after we won the championship, or the fourth year but the first year afterwards, we had a fairly new team. We only had maybe four or five guys returning from that championship team, whereas, this year it's pretty much the exact same DNA of the team makeup.

One thing I do know is, what I alluded to earlier, is that people know you're the reigning champs. Seats fill up a little easier. People start making shots maybe when they don't normally make shots. Things are stacked against you a little bit. But that's part of what being great takes is, you know, being a champion, being number one, and then backing it up and seeing what you can do next, because once the first game is played this year, everyone's going to kind of remember the championship, but it's on to the new season. Like, there's no looking back. Like nothing we did last year is going to help us achieve the goal again this year.

Q. Along those lines, the last six champions have either didn't get past the second round or they were a first-round knockout, like the Lakers that year. What can the Thunder do to break that chain going into next season? I know it's hard to predict because it's so early, but from the outset what comes to mind?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, just finding ways to get better. I think the big thing for us, we took -- other than maybe the first and the conference finals the other two series went seven games. So there's obviously room for improvement.

And I think if you come into the season thinking it's going to be smooth sailing and it's just going to be the same thing, you're like I said earlier, very naive to what reality is like because every season has a different story. Every team writes a different story each season just based on how many games there are, the ebbs and flows of the season, injuries occur, things you can't predict, things you can't control.

So, I think for us it's really just about seeing and finding ways to get better. And I think we do have room to improve, like I said, because teams took us to seven games. It wasn't like we won 16 games in a row and we were crowned champion. So there's definitely room for improvement. It's just about finding those areas and then working on it throughout the season.

Q. Alex, last year, of course, we had some intrigue at the start of the season. You and Isaiah had joined the team. This year nobody has joined the team that's going to play. What are the advantages and disadvantages of just literally turning the roster and running it back?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, the continuity part obviously helps. It's not a lot of teaching early in the year, whereas, on different teams with new guys and you're learning different concepts and kind of strategically how you want to play.

I think for us fighting the complacency, fighting the human nature of winning and not sitting back and resting but being on the front foot and being -- attacking the season and attacking the process of trying to get better, which I think we'll do a phenomenal job with.

Obviously the season we had last year is up there with some of the greats that have ever happened in the NBA. So, I think assuming you're going to win as many games and win the championship, like I said, this word that's coming up again, is a little naive.

You have to prepare yourself for tomorrow's the first day of training camp. You gotta go through practices, gotta go through preseason. We gotta play 82 games. There's a lot of stuff that has to happen.

And I think through that, just finding little motivations along the way, whether it's through the team, through the collective. Like you said, we have a bunch of guys coming back. So finding different carrots to tie at the end of the stick to chase, I think is the big thing, too, because obviously the goal is to win a championship whether it's our team returning with a bunch of guys that are experienced or people that revamped their team that have new life and new spirit.



But the process of getting there is difficult for everybody no matter if you're returning everybody or you got six new guys.

Q. A lot of times we think about young guys, (indiscernible), hey, what do you want to get better at. You're a veteran. What do you want to get better (indiscernible)?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah. I think for me it's pretty -- at least in my mind and I think in Coach's mind, it's pretty transparent how I'm going to play and how I fit into the team. So I think it's just about creating the efficiency within that role. You know, I think I've finally grasped that towards the end of the season and into the playoffs. I think I started to play really well, kind of to the capabilities that I had played the previous year, year and a half, two years in Chicago before I came here.

So I think it's just about building on that. I think it's about becoming more efficient defensively, probably fouling less, probably trying to become a more efficient decision maker on second side action, late clock offense, whenever the ball comes to me. And then just finding little ways to impact the team and kind of raise the level of others.

Q. Alex, did you ever request the Larry O'Brien Trophy at your wedding reception?

ALEX CARUSO: No. Everyone keeps asking me. I like to keep that separate from basketball. I think that was the main focus of me and my wife is to try and create that moment for us and the people that we care about as much as we could. We had a lot of time this summer to celebrate the trophy, and so we tried to keep that towards celebrating us.

Q. So how does a veteran leader like yourself help someone like Topic? You mentioned the continuity. (Indiscernible) is the most significant difference. How does somebody in your position help a guy like that fit into all this?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah. I think the great thing about Tope is that it's kind of a blessing in disguise, you get hurt like that at such a young age because you kind of learn the discipline of being a professional through that trial, just to be able to come back from an injury of that nature, it takes a lot of discipline, it takes a lot of focus, a lot of days where you're just, you know -- I saw him last year. It's just him and his -- Dan, who's his specialist that was on the staff. That was just him. They're working together doing the same things every day.

So that part of it I think is engrained in him and will be great. Just giving him the confidence and trying to help him learn through the fire. That's really what it is.

We saw that a little bit about Ajay last year where really talented players, you're going to get minutes because Coach -- Mark trusts guys. If you're a good player you're going to play. You're going to find times through the season.

And I think for him it's just about trying to fine tune his game and accelerate that learning curve that comes with being a new player in the NBA. And for him I think he'll be fine because he's pretty emotionless, to put it lightly. He's starting to make jokes now which is great. He's starting to get more comfortable. For him I think it's just about letting him know that making mistakes is okay and being the player he is, he's a really good player.

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