

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Coach Mark Daigneault

Press Conference



Q. I know you haven't had a lot of time to think about the season and the arc of it overall. Where do you feel like this team can potentially get better and improve through the season, and then any initial thoughts on tangible things that we can work on as a group over the summer?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Like I said last night, I think you can be simultaneously disappointed and also proud of the path that took us to the point where we could be disappointed.

I think here's what happens if you get too focused on the way the season ends: You can dilute the importance of all the things that lead up to that, from the summer work to training camp to the regular season, start of the regular season, the middle, the end, and then the playoff run.

I think, in a weird way, if you get too focused on just the last game or the last series, you can start to take those things for granted, and those are the things that led to us being able to play in those games.

So we're incredibly proud of this season and the accomplishments of this season. It's not to be taken lightly when you start to rattle off the things that the team did, and we can still be incredibly disappointed today. Both things can be true.

Q. The guys often talk about you in terms of walking alongside them. What's your role in helping them understand that as well? Whatever Finals looked like for them individually last year wasn't necessarily the story of their season, whatever this series left for them individually isn't necessarily the story of their season either.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: The thing I always go back to with that, there's what you do, which is how you perform and the team performs, and then there's how you do it. That's always the thing that I marvel at with this team. It's like professionalism, commitment to craft, competitiveness, team orientation, the emotional ability to stay grounded in the highs and the lows.

All those things are really hard to do and are not to be taken for granted, and this team has normalized those things. The minute you notice that is when they start to slip. It's almost to the point where you can take those things for granted with this team, and that's a credit to the guys and what they've built.

Yeah, unbelievable respect and admiration for the guys.

Q. Mark, you put what you just said a second ago, put it in context with the whole season; obviously Chet's year was fantastic, but the ending was not probably what he or anyone else wanted. What's your sense of just how, you know, biggest games he maybe wasn't up to his standard. What's your expectation of how he'll bounce back from that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, in the previous series he certainly was. Those are the games too, because they get you to the Western Conference Finals. You don't just get a ticket there. You have to earn it. He was such a massive part of positioning ourselves on that.

Any time a player falls short of the level that they are used to playing at, I think it's important to remember they're on a team, and the global approach of that team has an impact on how everybody plays.

So you can't separate one person out from that. It's a team sport.

I have a responsibility with every single player, when any player is falling short of what they're capable of, disappointed in their performance, I take that very personally and doing everything I can always to try to help them in any way that I can, and when a player isn't up to their level that they're used to, I have a responsibility in that and willing to look in the mirror first on that.

I've done that over time with all the guys and certainly did that in this series not only with Chet, but with multiple players, because obviously this series was challenging.

Then there's the individual responsibility of the player obviously to perform, but I think it's important, when you look at any player's performance, their success as well, is a by-product of the team environment that they're in on the



court, off the court, the positions they're put in and then the individual performance of the player, which is probably most important.

But they're all interconnected. I think, when a guy struggles, they tend to get pulled out of that, and that's not necessarily accurate.

Q. On the subject of Chet, you said earlier in the series that you didn't believe in the concept of a bad matchup, that you would instead believe in the idea that matchups can just change when a player is asked. When you say you felt you needed to put Chet in a better position to be the player you needed in the series, what specifically do you think you could have done better in the aftermath?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, I think, if I had a great answer for that, I would have been able to do it like yesterday. So some of that is just a reflection point. I don't necessarily have an answer for that right now, but that's the lens through which I'm going to look at it in summer, not only with them, but with the whole team, with any player.

Any player that is not able to perform to what they're capable of in a given game or moment, and there's multiple players at any time going through that. I'm always going to look in the mirror on that. So I'll do that in this case, and if the team takes pride in the environment you create around the player and the player takes individual responsibility and everybody is kind of looking internally, that's when the magic happens in terms of guys being able to grow through those things and the team being able to absorb those things.

That's what we've done for a long time, but that never ends. It's competition. There's always going to be the next adversity, the next challenge.

Q. Chet's 3-point volume (indiscernible) the series has gone down, down, down, and even some of the shot -- how much do you feel that particularly needs to change? Part of his appeal is the shot blocker, stretch the floor. How much is it about take more 3s or you guys need to create whatever it is?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Certainly that's a huge weapon for him. That's it; we want him shooting. Just like anybody, we want him shooting good 3s, but we know when he shoots good 3s, that's an efficient shot for our team. Generating more of that is a priority, I agree with you on that.

Again, going back to my initial framework on this, that's not all on Chet. It's not all on me. It's not all on the team. It all

works together for every player. But that's how I look at those things. It's not necessarily only on one of those factors. It all works in concert, and when you get that going, obviously good things happen.

A lot of good things have happened not only for the team, but for Chet, but when you're in these long runs and we're now approaching a point where we're in a little bit of a long run. I mean, Chet is -- every minute Chet Holmgren has been on the team, we've been a 1 seed in the Western Conference. And it wasn't the case before Chet was healthy.

So when you're in these types of situations, they're not all -- you don't stay up here all the time, but your ability to grow through it as a team individually, as a staff, organization, that's what's important.

Q. Mark, MVP is a unique situation. Done it two years in a row now. From your perspective, can you talk about SGA, in the prime of his career right now, and your ability to be able to coach the guy?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: He's a great player, and I've said this many times -- I just said it about the team -- there's what you do, and what he does. He scores 31 a game efficiently. He is a great playmaker. He plays both ends of the floor. He's a great on-court leader. He delivers under pressure. That's what he does. That's why he won MVP. Same lens.

But it's how he does it that is most impressive to me -- the way he operates, the consistency with which he operates, the responsibility he takes for his performance, the way he invests back into the team, the dignity he treats everybody with, the class he displays in all situations. That's what's most remarkable to me and what I appreciate most about him.

Q. Do you sit back and think to yourself, it's my responsibility to make sure that I'm using all of my tools that I have, with Sam...

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Oh, yeah. That's your job. That's the job of all the coaches, the sum of all the parts, that the team is better because you're coaching it. Any second that any player on the team is short of that, the first place I look is in the mirror.

Q. You were the second youngest coach in the league; now you're the fourth longest tenured head coach. Obviously when there's a time with all the coaching changes and the stability and trust you've been given, just what does that do for you?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: My first is gratitude for everybody. Gratitude for Sam obviously. Gratitude for all the people I get to work with, the people that do the heavy lifting that put the wind at my back and everybody's backs, team's back with the work they do behind the scenes in the organization. Gratitude for the players and the team I've had the privilege of coaching.

Great people all the years, and these last few years, great teams. This is a great team. There's no team I'd rather be coaching. I'd rather wake up today eliminated from the Playoffs coaching this team than any other team.

Like I said, it's not necessarily what we do, but it's how we go about it, and I don't take that for granted one day. So I have nothing but gratitude to all the things you're talking about.

Q. Isaiah Joe was really good for you guys through the regular season, out of the rotation a bit through the Playoffs. I don't know if you can even look at it from a personal level, but is it hard for you as a coach knowing I can't play everybody in the Playoffs to maybe not be able to reward a guy who was so good during the regular season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: That's the worst, to be honest with you. I can't imagine -- it would be like somebody coming up to me before the game, hey, you're not going to coach tonight. Dave Bliss is going to coach tonight. We think it's a better fit.

So I don't take that lightly. I don't take that lightly. There's obviously a constraint on minutes. There's a constraint on roles. You have to make those decisions. The best way to make those decision on merit, do what's best for the team in your estimation, but the hard part about that is it's subjective largely.

So I could be wrong in situations, and that could impact the guy's role or career. The best thing I could do is be honest, be as fair as I can, and not take it lightly. I understand they have short windows to play in the NBA, even the guys that play for a long time.

Relative to your life, it's a short window. This is their dream to be here. Their dream is in our hands. We take that responsibility with great weight, and that's the best thing I can say about that.

Q. You guys obviously won a ton of games, but how would you describe the absence of Jalen Williams during the majority of the season, particularly through in the later stage of the Playoffs, and how important do you view his summer to get his body right?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, we lost a lot of games to injuries this year. That's part of when I say you can be disappointed and -- for us to position ourselves to be in home court advantage through the Western Conference Finals, to have the NET rating we had, to have the record we had while absorbing that is a great credit to the depth of the team, the cohesiveness of the team, the team's ability to problem solve and adapt on the fly.

Missing him -- I've said this all along -- it impacts your ceiling. Missing Ajay Mitchell impacts your ceiling. But we've been able to maintain a really high floor. I'm proud of that. That's a huge accomplishment for the season, and it will pay dividends moving forward and will pay dividends for us this year.

I'm excited about a healthy Jalen Williams. I'm excited about a healthy team and what that can look like moving forward. So that becomes the priority especially with him. It was a tough year for him, and we need to do everything we can to get him in full form, and he does too.

I give the big guy a ton of credit. He played the entire playoff run last year with a ligament tear in his wrist that no one knew about. The minute we lost the game, the sky falls on a guy like that. Didn't make one excuse, helped us win a championship. Came back this year, had the surgery, didn't start the season, and then had the hamstring stuff.

He's had a very, very tough calendar year, but he stayed inside the team, stayed competitive, and we've got his back as we move through this and gets back to 100 percent.

Q. You mentioned the injuries. Those guys shuffle in and out and others step up. Cason offensively took some massive leaps this season. What impressed you the most about that, and what you have planned for him next as an offensive player?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Him and Holmgren both got here the same year basically. Chet has his (indiscernible) year, and his rookie season, and I mean, all they've ever experienced is high level winning, and they played in high level games on a high level team while trying to establish themselves as young players in the NBA. That's one of the hardest needles to thread, and they've done that brilliantly.

First and foremost, they impacted in a big way a winning team. And yet have continued to improve and grow. Cason's been a great example of that. He's a much better player than he was a year ago or when he first came into the NBA. He has runway to continue to grow as many of our young players do, but he's always done that in the

context of the team and in the pursuit of team success.

That's pretty special for a guy that is a young player with a lot of ammunition and a lot of talent. He's been a huge part of what we've done and will be a huge part moving forward.

Q. Sometimes trade deadline acquisitions work, sometimes they don't. Jared jumps onto a moving freight train, and it worked great. What stands out to you about why he was able to do it, and what were your expectations getting him into your off-season training program?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I said this many times throughout the run when he was helping us, it starts with the individual person. He came in here with a great respect for the team and thread a great needle just in terms of respect for the guys but also aggressiveness and confidence in himself.

He was very appropriate with how he handled that. A lot of credit goes out to the team. The locker room's ability to bring a guy in like that, recognize he's one of us, and make him feel like a part of it allowed him to operate at his best.

It goes back to the thing I said with Chet, it's the positions you put him in, it's the team on and off the court, and it's the individual player. That's why he had success this season, and we're thrilled. He's a young player. He's a prime player that we haven't had the time with.

So we're excited to get to know him, his game, and think he can make a lot of gains here over the course of the summer as we head into next season.

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