

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Alex Caruso

Press Conference

Q. Long season, multiple playoff rounds. What signals you about young guys stepping into more minutes or bigger role. Every guy on the roster here.

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, that's something coach talks about, we talk about everybody being ready at any given time and kind of creating your own rhythm. That's the standard we hold through the building of being a pro and being able to play when your number is called.

Every season is different and different stories and adversity you go through. I think we do a good job of managing that with all that stuff I talked about, just being ready to play.

Q. Where do you feel like you guys lost this series?

ALEX CARUSO: Like in totality or you want me to tell you a specific play?

Q. No, not a specific play, more like what led to the series loss.

ALEX CARUSO: Just kind of ran out of time. We weren't good enough in stretches, I think. We didn't course correct fast enough. I think there were games that were close that we ended up losing, 1 and 7 in particular, that we had chances to win in both games. We made too many mistakes. They made some tough shots as well.

It was really good basketball from both teams, and they just made a couple more plays than us in a couple of these flip games.

Q. You guys don't achieve the ultimate goal, but how confident are you that if this group stays together, maybe even fully as is, you've still got a long run?

ALEX CARUSO: That's out of my control, outside of anybody that's contracted to be back next year. Yeah, I mean, every year it's the same thing: You either win the last game, one team does, and the other 29 teams are pissed and want to come -- or most of them are upset and want to come back the next season and try to chase that



trophy again.

So no doubt in my mind we'll regroup. We'll get back to where we need to be and be ready to go to Game 1 next year.

Q. Don't take this as me calling you old, but you are an elder statesman.

ALEX CARUSO: We're getting there now.

Q. You are an elder statesman on the team. You know better than most how fragile it is to win. How have you come to view the fragility of championship-level seasons? Have you thought about the window and urgency and stuff of that nature?

ALEX CARUSO: Not as much of a window and urgency standpoint in like a big picture, but like the disappointment of understanding your team is good enough to win a championship and you don't is probably the biggest thing that weighs on me.

Even with Ajay and Dub being out, you know, going from (indiscernible) to a 62-win team in the league and feeling confident and thinking we should win and go to The Finals and win still, like that's just the confidence we kind of carry ourselves with, myself in particular.

So, yeah, that's probably the biggest disappointment of that is you don't always have a team that can win it every year in your career, and I think this team was good enough to do it and didn't. That's the part that will sit heaviest.

Q. Just the message you gave last night, it seemed to need it. You message was you guys aren't going to overreact to losing Game 7 when you fully had a chance to win it. How do you balance that feeling knowing that the Spurs are only going to keep improving presumably?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, that's the challenge for us is to get better too. You know, having Dub and Ajay would have helped obviously, but we had enough to get the job done. We lost by eight points. (Indiscernible) by ten to start the first quarter, so there is room from there. We pretty much played even since then in the game.



So there were plenty of chances for us to win that game in the series, so I don't know if necessarily -- you know, you talk about not overreacting. It's basketball. You're going to win or lose, and you've got to go on to the next game. You can be disappointed, and you can be upset, but life goes on.

You've got to keep moving. Like the sun came out today and I'm going to start planning out how the summer is going to look like, how I'm going to get better, how I am going to come back and make my teammates better and go chase it again.

Q. How have you seen Ajay .J. progress since he's gotten here?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, just continues to get better. I think you saw it from random games through the regular season, his rookie year to getting hurt and coming back, and then this year he took a big jump as far as I think his confidence and his ability to understand how good he can be and get to spots and be effective, all the way into the playoff series, where Dub goes down and all of a sudden we're telling this guy, hey, you're going to be the main ball handler in the second unit and start alongside Shai.

I think he's handled it well. His personality and his work ethic blend perfectly for a young player to be able to step in and play well.

Q. This might be a little bit (indiscernible) question considering how close you guys were. When you played the Spurs at Christmas, you talked about how you guys need to bring that nastiness and energy consistently every game, which you guys had last year. What can you do to get back to bringing it every single day like you did when you won the championship?

ALEX CARUSO: Again, I think that Christmas, I don't know if you all thought the Spurs were going to win 62 games and be here in the Western Conference Finals playing us in Game 7. That might be naive of me not to understand that.

But Houston was like that the year before. We played them earlier in the year and had some really good games. You don't realize these are going to maybe be the 1 and 2 seeds at the end of the year in December.

It might be just understanding that teams are getting better and teams are hungry to play against you. That will be the case for them and New York next year after they get to The Finals.

I'm not sure if there's -- we won 64 games. You don't do that without going out and playing hard the majority of the nights. It might just be recognizing more elevated matchups through the regular season.

Q. To that point, you played those guys 12 times this year, which is a lot. When did that start to feel they could be sort of a (indiscernible) to you guys?

ALEX CARUSO: I mean, once you lose to somebody, at least from my perspective, we knew how good of a team we were already, winning the championship and coming back with the same team. So when a team beats you outside of maybe 15 teams in the league that you know aren't going to be there at the end of the season, regardless, the kind of loss you just chalk up to the NBA season, you register it.

Whether or not we thought they were going to be who they've turned out to be and a really good team, there's not much to -- like I had no idea to speculate and say that, just because so much happens in the course of a season. One injury changes a team's entire season.

The reasons the Spurs got Dylan Harper. Wemby missed a whole bunch of games with the leg stuff. Sometimes you need the course of NBA seasons to shape up and see what the future is going to be. You can't always predict that.

Q. On a little lighter note, are you playing in the Century Championship in Lake Tahoe?

ALEX CARUSO: Yes, I've got to practice.

Q. It's reported you have a 5 handicap.

ALEX CARUSO: Right now it's probably closer to 5. I haven't played in a while.

Q. Really how long does it take you to get back to shooting?

ALEX CARUSO: On a golf course?

Q. Yes.

ALEX CARUSO: I could probably roll out on an average golf course and shoot 80 right now. I had three summers of practice in Chicago. We played very late into the summer.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to that. It's going to be fun. A little more practice time than I was hoping for. It's a great event. I'm thankful that I'm going to see a bunch of people

that I know that I've looked up to that play in that tournament.

Some guys like Vince Carter, Ray Allen, being able to pick brains on basketball there as well, it's a fun event, and I'm looking forward to it.

Q. You signed a long extension after being traded over here. As you get to the next stage of your career well into your 30s, how much do you view this as an organization of where you want to be long term and it's such a good fit for you?

ALEX CARUSO: Obviously I signed a long-term contract, so I'm looking forward to being here a few more years. The relationship has been great to me and the Thunder organization. Thankful to Sam for everything me an extension and trust me enough to be there for this handful of years.

We'll see what the future holds next time. I've enjoyed my first two years here. It's been great. The people here, the city, the organization, they're all very high class people, very salt of the earth, will do anything for you to make sure you're in a better place.

I think those are values that I hold very highly. That's the way I was raised. That's the way my parents are, my family is. It just feels like a very good partnership and obviously winning basketball games and having a good team goes a long way as well.

Q. If you can with Josh Hart with the Lakers, I feel like you guys are very similar and high effort, role players, doing all the hustle plays. Did you see that in him early on as both of you guys were rookies?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, a little bit. I think it was different for me understanding that I had to be a role player. I think there was a window for Josh where he was kind of one foot in, one foot out, maybe trying to be a main engine guy versus being a role player.

Somewhere along the way, he figured out how his game translates into the NBA. He's done a really good job of kind of perfecting that and being super comfortable with who he is and how he can affect the game.

He's a fun player to watch. He's a good dude although he is a Chelsea fan. So he's not perfect.

Q. Having been around Mark for longer than anyone in the organization for sure, what makes him a good coach now?

ALEX CARUSO: I think his willingness to get better, to understand that he doesn't know everything, and he wants to figure out what else he can do to improve himself as a coach, improve himself as far as like relationships and players and understanding guys and how to communicate with them.

He's a good human, and like I said, during the course of an NBA season, that goes a long way.

Q. Has it been a good experience playing alongside great players, what has been your observation of Shai over the past two years and his accomplishments?

ALEX CARUSO: Everything that he does kind of exudes greatness just like all the guys I've been able to see and be around in my career, just from confidence standpoint, a work ethic standpoint, a willingness to bring his teammates along with him, the consistency of it, doing it every single day; not being satisfied when you have success and wanting more.

Those are all the things that any of the great players that I've been able to be around and see and get to know in my career so far, he has all those things.

It's a joy to be his teammate, to go to war and compete with him.

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