

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Friday, June 26, 2026

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Sam Presti

Aday Mara

Bennett Stirtz

Otega Oweh

Press Conference



Let's give one more round of applause for our community picks.

(Applause.)

Now we've had a chance to meet our community draft picks, let's meet the newest members of the Thunder. Please welcome to the stage Aday Mara, Bennett Stirtz, Otega Oweh, and Thunder Executive Vice President and General Manager Sam Presti.

Sam will have a few opening comments, and then we'll open it up for questions to the media.

SAM PRESTI: I want to say a couple of things about today. Obviously extremely excited to welcome these guys on the stage: Aday, Bennett, Otega.

I'm going to talk about them a little bit, but I want to talk just briefly about what the draft really represents at its core. It's really about seeing things for what they can be and not just for what they are. That's how we've always looked at the draft process.

I think it's remarkable that we're sitting here in this building today and having Harold Hamm, one of our great partners, with us because he's a great example of someone that can see things for what they can be and not just what they are or they were. Harold saw an open field, and he saw opportunity, creativity, a chance to think big and bold, and has developed one of the premier energy companies in the entire world through that vision.

Also we have our chairman and owner Clay Bennett, another person that saw an opportunity, not for what it could be -- not for what it was, but what it could be, bringing an NBA team to Oklahoma City. But not just to have a team, to see the opportunity to have a championship level organization and championship level team to think and dream big about what is possible in a place like this.

What gives me great excitement is that in two years that type of vision between these two community leaders will come together when we open the Continental Coliseum, and from there, that's where these tremendous young men come into the picture because, when we have young players enter our organization like these guys, they're

MATT TUMBLESON: Hello everyone. I want to welcome everyone today to the Hamm Institute for American Energy overlooking beautiful downtown Oklahoma City for the introductory press conference for the Thunder's 2026 draft class.

Before we meet the newest members of the Thunder, we want to introduce you to some special guests who work in the community who we have with us today.

Over the last multiple years we have this great Thunder tradition we've started, where we have invited these great people doing great work in the community, to acknowledge the work that they're doing and have their own draft day here with us. We call them our community draft picks. This year specifically we're recognizing individuals making a difference in the workforce development space.

With us today, we have Chad Jordan, founder and CEO of SidexSide. Stand up, Chad.

(Applause.)

We have Whitley O'Connor, founder and CEO of Curbside.

(Applause.)

We have Melissa Richey, vice president of marketing and development for Goodwill Central Oklahoma.

(Applause.)

And we have Meagan Taylor, executive director of the Diversion Hub.

(Applause.)



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really catalysts to help us continue to build out our vision, evolve our organization, both as people and players, and lead us into the new generation that we'll see in 2028.

Excited to get these guys started. All of them encompass the type of competitiveness, intelligence for the game, long, hard work and hours that they've put into the gym.

And the one thing I'd also add is every one of these guys has come through different circumstances. You could come from Zaragoza, Spain. You could come from a Division II school. You could grow up in a household with pretty competitive family members that will drive you and push you and show you how tough you have to be to get to this level. Everyone's gone through their own path.

Now we join together to see if we can continue to explore their potential together. We couldn't be more excited to have everybody with us.

With that, happy to take any questions.

Q. Sam, just a question for you as you assessed all three of these players in the Draft. Maybe what through line you saw in terms of qualities as human beings to bring into this organization.

SAM PRESTI: I think kind of what I touched on there a little bit is everybody has their own path. Everyone's had to overcome different circumstances that have been presented to them. They've shown the perseverance but also the ability to understand what they have to work on, that they need other people to be successful, and then a tremendous amount of confidence in that work, not necessarily looking for immediate results.

Each one of these players has slowly but surely developed, and their talents have been honed through these different stops that they've had. They've all had different stops in their careers, and I think that's probably the main thing that I see.

Then obviously as players, the competitiveness, the fact that they've been around winning. You think about the programs they've played for and the places they've been, the people they've been around, those things are very important to us.

Q. Sam, I wanted to ask you about Bennett and what it was that stood out about him that made you want to give up future draft picks to move up one spot to make sure you got him.

SAM PRESTI: In any situation, you guys know this, we're always looking to move up, and we have multiple plans to

do different things if the players that we're looking to acquire are not available. In this case, it worked out for us.

Bennett is a player that has a great feel for the game, has been successful at multiple levels. I think in an NBA context, some of the things that he does will be really amplified.

At the same time, I'm sure you'll hear him say this, but he's got a lot of work to do, just like every one of the guys that has ever sat up here at this table, but he's ready to do that, and he's shown he's willing to make sacrifices in order to win, and those are very important traits in the modern NBA.

Q. I wonder if you could speak a little bit to Aday's abilities. Obviously this is a franchise and a team that loves to play great defense. What do you see out of him, and what do you think about his future, just how he projects as an NBA defender?

SAM PRESTI: Sure. I think everybody understands in the world that we live in today, the modern NBA, the value of rim protection, but also, I think, the ability to think on the floor quickly and react to different situations because the offenses are so random.

But somebody that can cover that kind of ground but is a great communicator with his teammates, puts himself in situations maybe not to get the actual statistic or event, but to deter things also. That's where our defensive system really comes into play.

But like any other player, a lot of things that -- we've talked about this -- it will be slow and steady approach, getting to learn the schemes, getting to learn from the players that we have.

I love his humility and his optimism but also willingness to understand that he's got some great guys to work with and learn from and a coaching staff that's going to help guide his development.

Q. Sam, you mentioned --

SAM PRESTI: You can ask these guys questions too.

Q. You mentioned Otega's background. It seems like you can see his competitiveness every time he takes to the floor. Can you explain that, the motor he plays with and the chip on his shoulder?

SAM PRESTI: We have a process in the fall where we go through and look at previous year's film, did that actually with all three of these guys. That starts about September. We sit in a room, and we kind of review the previous year

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of players that are still remaining in college.

Sometimes when you know a player isn't going to be in the Draft, you're prioritizing the players that you know will be. I think going back through that process and seeing the previous year's film really helped us, I think, hone in on him during the year relative to the things you're talking about, just competitiveness, engine, physicality, force.

To have that in somebody that size, but a big part of that is mentality. You have to peel back the layers. Where does that come from? Obviously you get into his family background and the history of competitiveness and athletic accomplishments, and that becomes really interesting. So we walked into the season kind of seeing how real that was.

Q. If I could ask a second one for Aday. This is an OKC team that has great team chemistry and plays with a lot of joy. You seem to fit really well into that. I know your nickname is The Big Goof. First part, where does that nickname come from, and can you just describe the love for the game that you play with?

ADAY MARA: Well, Dusty said it in a press conference, it comes from Reno 911! I had to watch it a little. It was a couple of chapters of the series. Yeah, it comes from there. Obviously when I was just practicing and made a play, and I was just like joking around, that's where it comes from.

I think obviously the years before, you watch this team as a fan, and just by watching it on TV, you can see the good chemistry that they all have and the good relationship. So I'm super grateful that I'm coming to this environment, to this team, because after being in Michigan and knowing what you have to do to win the championship, like one of the biggest things is to have a really good relationship with the players. So I'm very grateful to be here.

Q. For all three players, what excites you guys about the fit of being in Oklahoma City?

BENNETT STIRTZ: I'm just excited about creating a relationship with the guys and winning. Like it's super important for all three of us to be around winning, and we have to maintain that, and we have to come in ready to learn.

We're going to make mistakes, but we've got to be ready to make mistakes and learn from all the other guys that have made and won The Finals. We've just got to be ready to learn and put our learning hats on.

OTEGA OWEH: Yeah, I'd kind of say the same thing, but

I'm really looking forward to just getting better, learning from a lot of the great players ahead of me. On top of that, the joy that everyone plays with, I feel like that's something that rubs off on everybody in the locker room. So I'm excited for that.

ADAY MARA: I will say that I'm excited to just go through the process. I think it's going to be an adjustment. Obviously college and NBA, there's a big difference, but I feel like just coming with this group, having to play with great players is going to be a really good thing for me, just playing at my best level every day. So I'm excited for that.

Q. Aday and Otega, you guys both transferred early in your college careers, really excelled at your new home. Bennett, you obviously climbed up the ladder in college. I wonder if all three of you could sort of talk about that path of maybe running into some adversity in the college ranks and then kind of finding a new home and really excelling.

OTEGA OWEH: I feel like that's how basketball is. It's a lot of ups and downs and so many experiences that you can learn from. That's kind of just what my college career was like, just learning from everything, every hand I was dealt, and then obviously making a decision for myself, my family, to transfer and go to another school and use those experiences to grow as a player.

That's something I'm definitely going to use to grow as a player here. It's going to be a lot of ways I could learn and things that are going to challenge me as a player and a man. So just being able to use the experiences that I learned in college is definitely going to help me.

BENNETT STIRTZ: For me, I really didn't have any options out of high school. So every opportunity I got, every college I went to, I kind of took the opportunity and seized it. Again, moving up another level, I've done it three times, and I'm excited to do that again.

ADAY MARA: As they said, I think everything matters during your career. So every path you take, I feel like you're going to enjoy it or you're going to learn from it. So I think you've just got to take advantage of everything.

Yeah, I feel like just by learning and learning from those experiences, that's what got me to be here. Yeah, I just feel like -- I believe in destiny, so I think it's just things you have to go through during life to learn from it.

Q. Bennett, I know people obviously know your college path, but your family has small town Kansas roots in addition to speaking of small colleges and that sort of thing. I'm wondering how those connections

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back to really humble roots, how do you feel like that affects you now?

BENNETT STIRTZ: First off, they're all excited to be close and be able to come to some games. I think just growing up and going to Abilene, Kansas, and just seeing what family really is and what it means to me and our whole family, I think it's really important because that's what this is, that's what the culture is.

Everyone in here, it feels like a really close-knit family. I'm excited to hopefully add to that and really looking forward to it.

Q. Bennett, kind of on that same note, but you bounced around with Ben McCollum and saw a lot of success in each spot. What's it going to be like to be rooted in one spot and that spot be Oklahoma City?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, super excited. Super excited for having a new coach. I went to Liberty High School, and my dad was my high school coach. So that was kind of a change to go to Coach McCollum at Northwest. We're back at it again and just excited to learn from a new coaching staff.

Q. Otega, I know you began your college career in Norman, but what did you kind of learn during your time in Oklahoma about the tight-knit community that this place is?

OTEGA OWEH: I'm obviously super familiar with OKC. Obviously Norman is not too far from here. It's really just a full circle moment. I know the atmosphere is all basketball really because this is what OKC, they live and die basketball. So I'm kind of used to it already.

I'm excited to be in that environment. I got some good practice my first two years and then went to another school where they also live and die basketball and breathe it. So it's definitely something I'm excited and used to.

Q. Bennett, I actually drove through Maryville earlier this week. Obviously not a lot of players with a Division II background in the NBA. Did you dream about the NBA when you were at Northwest, and can you talk a little bit about the journey that took you from Maryville, Missouri, to here today?

BENNETT STIRTZ: As a kid, I dreamed of it, but I didn't think it was possible until kind of my junior year in college. Kind of my realistic dream in high school was just to play college basketball.

Then, again, my coach left, so followed him to Drake. He

left again, followed him to Iowa. It's kind of just being where my feet was and seizing the opportunities, that's pretty much it.

I just had the mindset of like humble confidence and respecting people and just trying to get the respect of my coaching staff and other people around, who I was around to get to where I am today.

Q. Sam, you talked about Aday's defense specifically, but just his overall skill set, size, skills, how does he sort of fit with the way the NBA is going?

SAM PRESTI: Again, like for us we're always focused on how to internalize what will make us the best team, not necessarily trying to follow whatever the league is doing, but at times maybe be shying away from that in different ways.

But relative to his skill set, obviously it's very rare to have somebody with that type of feel for the game that also presents and has the level of rim protection on the other end of the floor. It's usually trade-offs. That package doesn't come together very often.

I think the other thing is just his joy for being around like success and his willingness to -- if you speak to the people around him, like he -- I think I read a quote where he was saying like somebody scores, one person's happy --

ADAY MARA: When someone gets a basket, it makes one person happy. When someone makes an assist, it's two people, the guy who pass the ball and the guy who scores.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, what he said. You know what I'm saying? When someone sees it or feels the game that way, that is the kind of thing that builds energy in the team. When someone's truly enthused by that, in the success of the people around them.

I think the other thing is having been around a really good team at Michigan and figuring out how do you fit into a team with other good players and when you yourself are a good player, and that takes sacrifice. I think we've seen that across the board with the team that we have here.

We have a lot of guys that are extremely talented, and they have been asked to make room for other talented players in order for the team to be successful. He's kind of like intuitively speaks that language for us from a basketball sense.

Q. Bennett, you've been a marathon man in terms of the minutes you've been playing the last couple years. I just wanted to ask how well adjusted are you to

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playing without the ball in your hands? This has got to be the first time in a while this has happened for you, but how do you think that will help you scale down in terms of minutes but scale up in terms of efficiency?

BENNETT STIRTZ: I'm super excited to do that. First off, just excited to play with these guys, Summer League, and just playing a different role than what I'm used to.

Playing off the ball is something that I feel comfortable with, but whatever the coaches want me to do, I'm willing to do it. Whatever the team wants me to do, I'm willing to do it. I'm comfortable with doing anything, and I want to just sort of serve the guys on the team the best I can to win some ball games.

Q. Aday, we've had several prominent Spanish players come through Oklahoma City, Serge Ibaka, Alex Abrines. Just want to know if they've contacted you since you've been drafted, and if so, what have they told you about Oklahoma City?

ADAY MARA: I haven't talked to them, but I will soon. I want to know a lot more about the city and about the people, everything. So far I love the city. I love the way it is. I think it fits really well with the kind of person I am.

Yeah, I definitely need to talk with Abrines and maybe Ibaka, so yeah.

Q. Bennett, at what point in your long journey here did you kind of realize that, man, I can get to the NBA?

BENNETT STIRTZ: It was probably like halfway through my junior year. Kind of had to prove it to myself when I played the first Power 5 team. I never played one before my junior year. That was the first time, and kind of proved it to myself, proved it to our whole team that we could do it.

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