Oklahoma City Thunder
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Coach Mark Daigneault

Press Conference

Q. Looking at depth, trying to build something back, seems like it's more important that Dub and Chet be progressing. How important is it for particularly Chet to keep rising?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Critically important but not related to any other -- it's critically important that our players are always growing and evolving, especially the guys that play the roles that those guys play.

But I would say that if the question was about any person on the roster, it's needing to be a player development machine, and that includes guys at the top of the roster that start and play all the minutes and it includes the guys that are at the end of the roster and may not even -- a guy like Cason, we are incredibly proud of the way that he progressed while he was here. It sharpens our played and sends a signal to everybody that there's an expectation that if you're here, you get better.

And so I would say that it's critically important, but for broader reasons than the ones that you stated.

Q. From a personal perspective aside from basketball, what was it like losing Lu and Isaiah and Wiggs?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, everybody talks about it being a business but it's personal. Like we -- the things that you guys don't get to see that we do is the amount of time that we're spending together: Buses, hotel, flights, all the dead spaces in between game day, you get pregame meals and you're standing around so much. There's certainly bonds that get built.

It's always tough. I've been through it enough with other players to know that you see them again, and it doesn't change the relationship at all in the grand scheme of things.

Those guys, while you mentioned it, unbelievable points of pride for the program. You talk about a mutually beneficial professional relationship; I mean, those guys came at the back of the draft. They were not established when they came here. Helped build the identity of the team. Helped build the enormous that we now have and contributed to our rise and have their fingerprints all over a ton of success. It set them up to be decade-long NBA players and set them up to be great contributors in their new situations, and they have left an unbelievable imprint on us as well.

Q. Losing those guys, obviously you have an idea of how you will replace them, but overall, how will you do that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Every year there's a process that we go through where we add some new things, we remove some stuff that maybe we don't think this -- and this is tactical, not affecting the players. You add some stuff. You remove some stuff. It starts with your personnel. Any time your personal changes, that changes.

But what you're after is the same; the same things at the end of the day. So we are after the same things. How we go about getting there changes all the time. And certainly those are huge contributors. The biggest contribution they made was the consistency with which they played inside of their identity and in their role. They were the same exact player every single night. You could play them for X amount of minutes or Y amount of minutes. Some were MVPs at times. They were always in character. And so that's what is means to maintain, not only with the new players and the guys coming in.

It goes back to that previous question: We need to be a player development monster in terms of making sure that all of our players are constantly growing and improving. That's nothing new for us. That's the mentality we always take to it.

Q. Sam had mentioned J-Dub, being a multiplier; he made everyone around him better. What do you think he's going to be able to bring to the table? Seems like it can't be understated, getting him back

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, I've said it many times, having everybody impacts the ceiling of your team; and certainly him, just the versatility, what he can bring to the floor and the amount of different roles he can play and the amount of different lengths you can put around him. There's no group of players you can't put on the floor with

him, literally. He's played the five. He's played the one. He's guarded everybody. He's a high-impact player.

And then he plays with a competitive spirit and presence. He's got a major motor. And not every guy ascends to the level that he's ascended to, maintains that motor. When the lights go on, you smell the popcorn. He is he's ready to play. Can't wait to get him out there.

Q. Lu's departure, in particular, opens up more opportunity for Cason. What are the next opportunities for his accurate censure?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I'd be interested in his answer to that. That's the most important answer.

As for me, and this is honest, you can ask this about any player: I really don't make any assumptions about that. They have a lot of autonomy in the summer. The reason they have autonomy is because they come back in shape and they always come back in shape. They come back better. He's come back in shape. He's come back better. He's worked hard this summer. He's got his head down and focused. You never know where that can go from and from my standpoint, I feel like.

If I try to steer that much with him or any other player you could be putting up a ceiling. There are a lot of players that have evolved into something that I wouldn't have necessarily given an answer to.

So I have learned not to give the answer. It's a blank slate. Nothing we are doing prevents them from reaching their potential, as long as they are doing it inside the team efficiently, and he's got hit head down on that. I'm excited to see what it looks like.

I don't give out the starting lineup -- he started a lot of games to this point, really, if you look at it. He's started a lot of games. So I'm not going to get into any rotation stuff but he's started Finals games for us.

He's somebody that I trust as much as anybody.

Q. Obviously Jared came in midseason last year and ended up playing a really important role in the last rounds of the playoffs. With some departures from the guard rotation, how will his role look like and what has he brought to the team on the court, off the court, all that stuff?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I really don't define the roles before the ball starts bouncing for the same reason I just mentioned with Tim's question.

You know, the roles define themselves once the team comes together. The roles are earned. Minutes are earned. And you know, how somebody plays is earned based on the impact that they make and the efficiency they can do it with.

With that said, I have high confidence in Jared. He made a great impression with his time last year. He's a great worker, as a lot of our guys are. Most of our guys are great workers, especially the guys that are returning rotation players. Their summers are impressive, top to bottom. They come back in shape, and they come back renewed and motivated, and they get themselves there, and he's in that category.

Being in a camp with us is going to be helpful for him. It's really hard to do what he did last year, and he did it about as well as anybody could have done it. But he'll benefit from starting with us at the beginning of the race.

Q. What were your summer impressions of Aday and Bennett?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: You know, just baseline data points. Seen a lot -- there's some guys that, you know, they start -- they have great Summer Leagues and some guys that have poor Summer Leagues; some guys have great training camps, poor training camps. You're collecting the data points and just letting them declare where they are, how they can help the team, where they need to improve, where their strengths lie. And that's undefined at this point.

The impression I do get is -- Sam talks about this when he evaluates players in the draft. It always sticks with me. He probably won't remember saying it, but I always remember it. He'll be talking about a player, and he'll be like: I just want to be able to envision them standing over there with the team watching film or, like, in the practice.

He really tries to make sure that the person he's bringing in fits the ethos of what we have going. And those guys have that. I know that, just based on being around them.

As for role, impressions as players, I'll have a ton more information in a week, in a month, in a year. So I'll reserve that until I have that.

Q. Have you made any staff changes after losing Chip?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, happy for Chip, his new opportunity. Only staff changes, Bryce Alford, who was a player with the Blue. He played when I was coaching the Blue, actually. He joined the Blue staff the last couple

years. He was a Blue assistant coach. And we've promoted him to a player development assistant for player development position, and he'll assume a lot of those responsibilities.

Q. Wanted to get your thoughts on the idea of you guys went pretty early in your tenure of having no bigs and now five different guys.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, I mean, at the end of the day, our philosophy, from a stylistic standpoint, is you take what you have in terms of strengths and you figure out how to best use it.

So, you know, if the team's strengths are concentrated in the perimeter, then we'll probably end up playing more perimeter players. If the team's strengths are more concentrated in the front court, we'll play with more front court players. And we've proven that over time.

Now it's just a matter of learning what that is and being open to what that is, not predetermining anything, and just letting it play out and take the information as it comes and make the best decisions we can.

Q. Do you allow yourself, at least in the off-season, to think about things like how you account for Dort's loss? Because he played almost every game, 24 minutes guarding Luka Doncic, 24 minutes guarding Anthony Edwards. Do you think about, before you get into practice, just ways to counter his loss in situations like that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, we do, but at the same time, we know what he brought, you know, and we know -- and Wiggins and Joe, but we know what he brought. Certainly with the match-up difficulties you're mentioning, the physicality and toughness and all that stuff, and you know you need that stuff. If you want to win, you need to have that stuff. There's a reason he played the role he did on teams that were very successful.

Where you're getting it from, you have guesses, but I've just found the more open that we can remain, the more we're able to see clearly what's in front of us. I think the minute you bias that lens, then you start seeing what you want to see. And ultimately, you don't get to the best decisions when you do that.

So, you know, I know I'm dodging a lot of these. I'm not trying to be elusive. That's just really how I look it. I don't know. But I know we're going to need that stuff, and I know we'll get it from somewhere, it's just a matter of where.

Q. Cason's contract, everybody knows about that, and you see how other guys around the league may handle that. He seems to us pretty reserved. Any thoughts going into your mind with that situation unresolved and he's going to handle that going into training camp?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Not a bit. Everybody has a contract. Everybody makes a different amount of money. Everybody is at a different point in their contract. It's a thing that every player works through. We are focused on their performance and their growth, and that's what we are focused on with him.

If a player were to come to us and say, you know, something is a distraction that's away from the floor, we certainly meet them where they are on that, but only as a distraction. But he's the last person I'm worried about with that. He's going to focus on his performance and his growth, and so are we.

Q. Last year, I'm kind of paraphrasing here, I think you said that you approached the off-season as if you guys had lost to the Nuggets.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah. Didn't have to pretend this year.

Q. So to my point, was a major emphasis placed on matching up with the Spurs, how to beat that team, or is it bigger than that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: We went through this with Dallas two years ago, right, and the end of the season is always emotional because everybody really wants to win. But you go into the off-season -- our off-season approach, our process is the exact same every single year regardless of if we get eliminated, if we win.

We take the lessons from the regular season. We really, really dive into the playoff series, but not just the ones that we lose. We audit it. We take the lessons we can. We figure out what we need to add. We figure out what we need to cut.

The ones where you lose the series are informative, but we don't play San Antonio 82 times, and the most you can play them in a playoff series or in a playoff run, if you're fortunate enough to get to the playoffs, once.

So we need to make sure that what we are doing is broad enough that it gives us a chance to be competitive across opponents, including ones that we are not aware that are going to be really good teams. That happens every single year.

And so we need to be laser focused on ourselves. We need to take the lessons from that series for sure, and we did. But it's certainly not something that we overcorrect for because you end up chasing your shadow, and it prevents you from being your best as you move forward.

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