

Oklahoma City Thunder

Media Conference

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Sam Presti

Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: Appreciate everybody being here. I wish we were here under different circumstances. I want to give everybody a couple updates here on some of the events of last night.

First, just want to talk about Jalen. Was with him last night and this morning. He's in great spirits and is extremely optimistic about the situation. What he's dealing with is he's got a fractured fibula, dislocated ankle on the left side. This is an injury that generally we see more in football players. I've spent a lot of time speaking to different doctors, and his agents, us, his family, and it's a surgical situation. That's the way you deal with this type of injury.

We'll have a timeline for everybody once we get through the surgery. I can't really give you that right now because it wouldn't be appropriate. Got to kind of see where we are after that's done.

Like I said before, Dub, as everybody knows, he's as tough as they come. He's an elite competitor. Even last night, just miraculous in terms of his outlook and the way he's looking forward to attacking this. We're going to be with him the entire way.

We also got some tough news on Kasen Wallace last night. He has a left labral tear in his shoulder. Again, that's going to be a surgical situation as well. Timeline, we're going to have to get to that again once we have the surgery. We're going through the process right now to determine next steps.

Same thing with Kasen, so everybody knows. He's a total warrior and probably would have gone back in the game if we let him.

Obviously tough night last night. There's no way to paint that differently. I like to say, and we say within our walls all the time, there's a difference between being positive and being optimistic. I'm not going to sit up here and say this is exactly where we want to be or this is exactly how we'd like to have it. But at the same time, we're extremely optimistic about the recovery for both the players. Most importantly,



things could have been a lot worse.

I think in these types of situations, it's important to kind of take stock, take a step back, realize we're dealing with people, realize we're dealing with the greatest athletes in the world. They're going to be back out there. They'll be playing for our team. They'll be representing our city and our state in short order.

As an organization, I think also we talk a lot about the difference between reacting and responding. It's really our job to respond to these types of things. Unfortunately, we have a lot of practice responding to these things. But listen, I've said this from the day I got here: There's no silver platters here. As an organization and also as a city and a community, this is what we're built for. This is the kind of thing that gets thrown at you here, and you just plow right through it. You walk through punches and you step over road blocks, and I think our guys are ready to do that.

But it's certainly disappointing. I don't want to sugarcoat that for anybody. I think it's inside of all of us that we're ready to take the next step, figure out what's next.

The last thing I thought I would say is people talk all the time about how Oklahoma City is one of the best places if not the best place to play. A lot of times when they say that, they really start thinking about, well, it's the greatest place because when it's firing on all cylinders, you've got the crowd going crazy, the tee shirts are on the seats, it's warm outside, you've got playoff games, you're having celebrations for players getting awards and things like that. It really is a great place.

But I also think it's considered one of the best places to play because the fans are awesome when the wind isn't at your back also. That is something I think is going to be really important for us as we work through the next steps and why I think from a community standpoint, from our fans all around the world quite frankly, but here, I understand how disappointed they are. I understand really how hurt they are because they care so much about our players, and they want everybody to do well.

We love them for that reason.

These types of situations are where you really see the

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connection between a team and a group of athletes. I'm very confident that as we take the next steps, we're going to learn a lot about each other. We're going to learn a lot about our community, but I know how that's going to end up. It's going to be a continuous love affair.

We'll wrap our arms around these guys. We'll get them back. We'll get them healthy. But we've got a lot of basketball to play in front of us, and we've got to put it together, figure out what the next steps are because this is part of the business that we're in.

I'll take any questions.

Q. You just mentioned the connection between the guys that you've seen for years now. What stands out to you about the way that these guys handled adversity in the past? As you mentioned, it's not the first time that they've faced adversity as a group and how they walk and stride together through that.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, look, I mean, I just think -- I don't think words do it justice how close this group of players is. It's like, a lot of people say that. I can't ask you to understand it or to take me more seriously than the next person that says that about the team.

But there's a genuine love amongst these guys. When these things happen, it's really tough.

But at the same time, we've been through them, and there's also some tough dudes in that room. They play here. They know what it's about. They come together. But at the end of the day, there's a care factor for one another. And there's a care factor for playing for the team.

When you go through these things, you've just got to bind together and you've got to walk through tough things, and that's what we'll do. That's what we've done for 19 years now.

Q. Sam, sorry to be asking this in the immediacy after it, but you've set this team up for success in the short-term but also long-term as well. If you're going to be without these guys for an extended stretch, how do you kind of weigh the long-term outlook versus making a move or strengthening the team in the short term?

SAM PRESTI: You know, honestly, for me, the last -- not 24 hours, whatever it's been, is all about people. I know you've got to ask the question, and I have no problem with anyone asking me anything. You guys know that. But I really haven't given a lot of thought to that.

Right now it's about those two guys, their families, who -- these guys have the best families. And trying to be there for everybody, working through all the medical information, like I was saying before, making sure that I had something I could get in front of you guys to give you something. I know it's not everything you want.

I think when you're working here specifically, I know that there's a lot of people in our community that are worrying today. I saw it in the people's faces that I was walking past and the things they would say to me.

I just wanted to be available, try to give you what I could. But as far as those types of things, right now it's all about people management, our staff, and everybody associated with the team, but also our fans. I really, really feel for them too.

But we've been in some tight spaces as a collection of people. It's not for the faint of heart, this league. Like I said before, you've got to walk through some punches and step over some road blocks. We've done it in the past. We're going to have to do it again.

Q. You talked a second ago about how close these guys are. We've seen players get hurt before, but I don't know that I've ever seen many teammates have the emotional immediate reaction to what happened to Jalen last night. Have you ever seen anything like that, and what was your reaction as you saw such a visceral reaction out of so many of those guys?

SAM PRESTI: Again, I'm not trying to just give you -- I don't want to give you a stock answer. I don't think I've really got all the way to that yet myself because things were moving pretty fast.

I will say this, and I've said this to a few people: The things I see with this team inside the walls that people will never see, the way -- the humanity and the care, and obviously you saw that for everyone to see out on the floor last night, but when Otega had his injury, we had three guys in the room with him as they were taking his shoe off. It's just like, that kind of stuff, it just -- man, it just puts me in another world.

We've got a roster full of guys like that. I'm not telling those guys what to do. It's just their natural instincts, their compassion.

But at the same time, they're elite competitors. I just love the balance of that, and I think it's pretty special.

But yeah, I'm sure everybody was going through a different experience that time, including our fans, like I said before.



Q. You talked about Jalen and how his spirits were. In light of having played through the wrist, having had the hamstring injury last year, coming back and now this, how do you explain him staying positive through that?

SAM PRESTI: Hmm. I don't know exactly. I go back to the people around him. I just think, again, we've been blessed to have some great players who are great people, but we've also had some incredible families, and those people have had influences on the athletes at very young ages. I think I've said this for quite a while now.

We are who we are starting when you get 10, 12 years old. The people that are guiding you through life, that are pushing you through afterwards, that are telling you how the world works, I mean, we kind of get formed that age. Families, I think, make a huge difference. It may not be family; it may be a mentor, may be a coach. Everybody's family is different. But someone I think is helping build his mindset, and he has an elite mindset. It's what makes him a great player. It's what keeps him motivated. It's why we all love him.

Q. You've had to lead through a lot of different injuries like this, lead the organization, lead the players. What have you learned from Kevin's injury, Russell's injury, and what could help you in this specific situation?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, anyone that ever asks me when I do any type of thing with students or -- what's the worst part of the job, this is easily the worst part of the job, injuries, probably because they're so far out of everyone's control. You see how hard everybody works, how much they care. Team is a living, breathing thing all the time. When you experience something like that, it's a real challenge for everybody.

But I think this team has taught me a lot, quite frankly, with this stuff. Just the way they're so connected and the way they care about each other, it's so authentic. It's pretty remarkable to be around. It's inspiring.

It's one of the reasons why, like I said before, I could sit up here and try to be positive. I can't do that because no one can say that this is where you want to be. But I am optimistic because of the caliber of, I think, team that we know we have. We've seen that. We're not a theoretical team. And then also I think the caliber of the people that wear our jersey and our coaching staff and all the way through the organization and our ownership. We're all in it together, and we've got to battle.

Q. This might not be something you can answer right

now, but how difficult is it to kind of navigate through the natural urge of, like, this is a business and you have to do what's best for the team while also not overreacting to the depth of the team being hampered?

SAM PRESTI: I think I understand what you're saying. It's a tough business. Anybody that has sat in this chair will tell you that. It's tough because so many things that happen are out of your control. That also means the good things. When good things happen, it's not like you're pressing the buttons for that. There's a lot of good fortune. Things have to fall the right way when things are going to plan.

At the same time, when things aren't, you have to recognize that sometimes you don't have control over that. I think it's pretty cliché today to talk about things you can and cannot control. I think it's more about what you can react to and what you can respond to. I think reacting with emotion, that can feel good in the short term but not going to get us very far. How we respond, thoughtfully, skillfully, I think that's really the measure of what we're about.

We have our moments; don't get me wrong. I had a reaction last night with somebody that I had to call back today and say, you know, I owe you an apology. But responding is to me the name of the game, and that's even over a longtime horizon, and we've been at it for a long time.

We've been through things, but we'll navigate this. We'll do what it is that we always do. Like I said, I think we draw so much on Oklahoma and just all the lessons, I think, that we've learned here, and we try to pour those back out. That's the energy that you want coming from the stands back to the team because it's really just cyclical.

We're going to do our best to give good energy, and I think we'll get good energy.

Q. You mentioned Otega. Can you speak on what's obviously a difficult situation for him, and are there any plans for him to stay within the organization, rehab with the Blue as previous guys have done?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we're really working closely with him on his rehab. I talked to him the other day. Obviously we had to use a roster spot. I think maybe what Daniel was touching on is the business component of this.

But we never want to use a human-to-human touch. You can talk about the business or the finances or the data or whatever you want to -- analytics. But at the end of the day, it's people, and people go through things. They remember how you make them feel. We're not perfect at

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that, but we try to be direct and try to be honest and shoot everybody straight that's in that situation. That's what I tried to do with him.

That's another guy that I can't believe his mindset. For a younger person like that, pretty remarkable. I'm pretty confident he's going to be fine. But yeah, we'll do everybody we can to help him as he gets through this. It's a long road.

Q. Sam, you lose two starters in one night, both of them elite players, one of them all-NBA, both all-defense. How do you deal with that in terms of the cosmos of it all? It sounds like the organization and you and everybody has been put under some sort of divine test, the plagues of Job.

SAM PRESTI: How do I deal with it? For me, it's all about the other people. I haven't really thought about it that way. My first thinking is obviously the players, the men that go out there every night and compete the way that they do, their families, the people close to them. Then the people in our organization, it's been -- we've had some tough, uniquely tough circumstances over the last few years.

I think one of the things I tried to say to the staff this morning when I talked to them was, you know, we can't get to the point where we feel this is like -- this isn't a common situation. But with that being said, it's our situation, and it's our job to do the things that we do every day to stabilize our situation, our organization.

We have so many systems and so many processes and so many routines inside our building, and they're there for two reasons. One, to keep us humble when things are going well; and they're also there to keep us stable when things are not going well. So the message this morning is the train has got to keep moving. We have to be committed to those systems and processes regardless of the weather outside, and I think that's always helped us over the course of time.

It makes you realize that there's a lot of good fortune that has to happen in this business, and there's going to be some bad that comes with it if you do it long enough. But my focus strictly is just how do we create the best environment for the people that are working with us, namely the players, being there for them. Then I'll wake up at 3:00 this morning staring at the ceiling and I'll think about your question.

Q. Any thought to bringing Russell Westbrook out of retirement?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, like I said before, I haven't thought

about anything relative to the roster spot. I understand the question. But all I'm really focused on right now is players, getting them the right support, and then helping everybody with our group realize that we have a tremendous challenge in front of us. But this is what we do. It's also what we signed up for, and it's what we represent.

We have to come together and keep grinding, which I think we will do. I know we will do. Also recognizing, those guys are going to be all right. I think sometimes we lose sight of that too.

A, like I said, they're super tough, but these are also injuries that people have had, athletes have, people have, and they'll be back on the floor wearing our jersey, competing, and when they do, it will be another opportunity for our fans to recognize them as they have a few other guys that we've had in that situation in recent years.

Q. In terms of a decision you already made, these injuries do put in a certain light the decision you made to maneuver for Bennett. I was wondering what you could tell us about him and this opportunity that might be in front of him?

SAM PRESTI: Stirtz? Yeah, one thing we do is everybody usually gets an opportunity to play with our team because we're constantly looking for what the strength of the team is in a given year. We're not fixed on you have to play one way, we have to do it this way. There's no real formula to the way we think about the team.

The last time I think I did any type of press availability in here, it was Hartenstein's press conference when we signed him as a free agent. At that time, we had a lot of success with Chet at the 5 and what would that do. But we thought, if we had somebody else, then we could toggle those guys. We could add somebody else. So we're always thinking not in a fixed way.

With respect to Bennett, we'll see. We don't have a predetermined role. We don't have a predetermined path for him. But we don't for any player, down to -- we signed Micah Peavy the other day. He could have been thrown in the game tonight irrespective of the situation.

We'll see where we are with him. I think it is important to realize, though, that each one of the players, especially young players, it's such a big adjustment for them, especially with a team that's been together for quite a while. So I've been very impressed with all the new players and their ability to kind of just fit in seamlessly with how we play and also just be hungry for information.

But it's going to be an adjustment for him, however Mark

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chooses to deploy him. But it's going to be everybody. It's going to be a little bit different for us for a while. It was going to be different coming into the season irrespective because there was a lot of changes coming into this year so we knew we were going to have to figure out what the strengths of this team were going to be and how to lean into those and leverage those, and now it's just a little bit of a different puzzle here.

Q. Have you spoken to Shai and Chet directly, and what have those conversations been like?

SAM PRESTI: I don't want to get into those specific conversations, but Mark and I talked to the guys this morning. But all that stuff has got to stay in house, as I think everybody understands.

But down the roster, everyone loves those guys and feels for them. But we also know they're going to be back playing basketball again pretty soon. We're going to settle in and start playing as well.

Q. In relation to Jalen, considering the year he came off last year, hardly getting to play, what's the steps uniquely for him? All kinds of guys miss one year. Not too many guys miss two years, the bulk of the year. Anything different you have to do for a player like that if he gets virtually two years wiped out?

SAM PRESTI: I would need a little more time with it to give you a more skilled answer, honestly. I don't want to sit up here and act like I've got a perfect answer for you on that. I only say that not because I think it's a situation that requires tremendous investigation, but I'd be saying something kind of off the cuff that I wouldn't feel like has been really thought through.

But certainly every situation that a player encounters injury-wise is different because they're starting from different points in their career. Everybody is a different person. Everyone has different experiences.

So I don't think it's -- one thing I believe is that when you're dealing with people, you really are truly in a case-by-case situation because everybody is uniquely different, comes from a different place. You've got to understand their story to be able to help write the next chapter with them.

What I know about this particular person, though, is he is very unique. So I wouldn't compare him to anybody. I think we all saw his effect on our team these last few games, and I'm looking forward to him being the same guy when he's back.

Q. Obviously it'll take time for this team to figure out

how it's going to adapt without these two guys, but I'm wondering more short-term, here you are the second night of a back to back, these guys have to come out and play again. Obviously it's the nature of the business, but what's your expectation how they're going to handle this short-term situation?

SAM PRESTI: Mark is going to have them ready and organized. It's one of the reasons why he's so great. As I said before, we have a unique experience with this. It's not something you want to have a lot of experience with, but we do.

I think we'll probably lean on some of that. Then a large portion of it is we're very oriented. Like I said before, I think it keeps you humble in good times and keeps you stable when you're going through some adversity.

So we'll just lean on kind of what we do day-to-day like we've done for quite a long time and see where we can get to. But it's going to take some time to figure out the strengths of this team as constituted and then lean into those and play to those. But it's going to be a little bit different.

Q. A lot of people -- I guess this probably flew under the radar yesterday, but Jalen's parents were on the floor watching that entire thing. How as an organization do you guys handle that side of things, like not only supporting the player but also parents?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I don't think it's novel, but those people are a huge part of our ecosystem and our environment. The way I look at it is if you draft somebody at 19, 20, 21 years old, you really are -- you have a certain level of responsibility for them as they're so young. Trying to understand creating a good environment for them because obviously they have people in their lives, family members or mentors, or as I said before, could be friends, they're big parts -- I know my family is a big part of my life.

It's the same for all our players, so trying to make them feel as comfortable as possible and also be supportive when you have someone going through something very difficult.

Q. Is the time frame a medical thing, when you think you'll know about the time frame for these --

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, what I would say is both of these situations are surgical, and I just don't want to get in the game of giving you or giving anybody a time frame prior to that because it's really up to the person that is conducting the surgery to give us that information, and then we transmit it to you. I just don't have it, and I don't want to act like I have an answer for you just to be able to say

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something. So I've going to wait on that.

Q. You mentioned the timetable so I'm not going to ask about that. I know before you mentioned the thing that was lost last year was a lot of team chemistry and sort of team building in terms of the guys growing together and learning how to play together. How do you think these injuries will impact that going this year?

SAM PRESTI: Well, again, we have to get a better understanding of time frame. But again, what we'll be lacking potentially for this period of time is working on some things -- I think what I was referring to last year was last year we had some things we wanted to get to from the previous year, the year we won the championship, the Pacers series and the other series, and just never really had enough people on the court from that group to get to some of those team development things.

Now, individual development, I thought we accomplished a lot, but we couldn't get to some of those things that I thought would have been important.

This year, quite frankly, it was going to be, like I said when we were together in September, it was going to be a big year of discovery to figure out what this particular group would look like together because it was different, and now it's just taken a different -- it's got a different identity. So we'll learn plenty.

Would it be perfect if we could have had the team that started the year? Absolutely. I don't want to overreact to the first couple games, but if that was our starting point, and I don't think we really were flawless in any way, it would have been great to work with that.

But that's not the case. So now we'll turn our attention to the guys we do have and figure out what the strengths of this particular group are. That's what Mark is so good at and his coaching staff. It will just be a different version of that process but still the same process nonetheless.

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