

Emirates NBA Cup

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Oklahoma City Thunder

Mark Daigneault

Semifinal Practice Day



Q. Success isn't new to you guys. You've been winning for a while now. What can this experience in playing for a trophy, it's not the trophy that you want, but what does this opportunity present as far as just the continued growth and development of this group?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Honestly, I think the biggest thing it can present is we're in a different environment now than we're used to. We're in a non-NBA market. It's kind of a departure from the season, everything from this to the shootaround is different and great opportunity for distractions to take our focus off of what we need to do on the court.

Ultimately, if you have success, you have to handle more and more distractions and cut through those and stay present through those, and this is an opportunity for us to do that. Aside from that, we're trying to normalize it and treat it like any other game, which it is obviously.

Q. As a top ranked defensive team, how do you plan to go against another top ranked defensive team, exploiting their weaknesses while promoting your own strengths?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: We have great respect for Houston. They've had a great season so far. They're very difficult to play against because of their physicality, athleticism, intensity. They play with great intensity every night. They play to a high bar.

It starts with the respect we have for an opponent. It's hard to score on an opponent if you don't respect them, and we certainly respect them.

There's ways we try to crack them. There's ways they try to crack us. Our understanding of each other compounds over time. This will be our third time playing them, plus times from last season.

It's possession by possession. It's trying to gain advantages on offense and negate advantages on defense, but it's easier said than done the better the team is, and Houston is a very good team.

Q. Off the top, you were talking about the team's ability to cut through distractions, stay present. What have you seen over the course of time with this group? Any moments that stand out about the way that this team has kind of built that muscle up over the course of time to have an opportunity to flex it again here?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think we've shown uncommon poise and presence over time through kind of our rise, dating back to when we were winning 24 games, and there were distractions that came with that.

Then our Play-In year, where we were like a .500 team or so, and then last year, I think the team has continued to do a great job of staying present with the next challenge in front of us, continuing to focus on improving and growing through all the different experiences, not riding the emotional waves that come with that.

You're only as good as you are in the next challenge, in the next hurdle. So none of that stuff counts for our ability to do it now. We've got to replicate that both in how we behave off the court and how we play on it.

Q. I don't necessarily mean just being in the Final Four of an NBA Cup, but you're the No. 1 team in the West, I think second best overall record or close. Part of that is why you're here. Are you where you expected to be at this point in the season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I don't really have any expectations. We still have 70-something percent of the season remaining. We're still in the mode of trying to grow as a team. You don't want to be a finished product in December. You want to be a growing team that's building momentum through the experiences of the season, and the only way to do that is to focus on improvement.

Regardless of where our record lands us right now, it doesn't count for anything in December. So we're trying to build ourselves. We're trying to flex -- strengthen our muscle throughout the course of the season. We're bumping up against different challenges that we're having to overcome. We're having to solve different puzzles. Players are changing and growing and evolving because

we have young players still, and it's critical we see them as unfinished products that are constantly improving.

We're really trying to stay focused on that regardless of where it lands us in the standings or what the outcome of any game is. We continue to bet on that and hope and trust that that will land us in the most fully actualized version of our team that we can get to this season and in seasons in the future.

Q. Distraction seems like such a coaching staff kind of word. Do you get any sense that your players are excited about this, that they bought into the locale or the prize money or the bragging rights, anything at all about this?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think at the essence players are competitive. When we have practice and half the team in blue, half the team in white and we put a scoreboard on and it's time to compete, they play really, really hard. I would expect that to be the case for 29 other teams.

I think you're talking about people who have ascended to the most competitive level they could possibly ascend to as players. Competition turns them on regardless of the circumstance. If it's competition in the NBA Cup, they're going to try to win it. If it's competition on a Tuesday night in January, they're going to try to win. If it's competition in a practice, they're going to try to win. That's why they're all players in the NBA.

So, yes, they're excited about the competition, but they're always excited about the competition. I think this team has proven that in a lot of different contexts.

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