

Emirates NBA Cup

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Oklahoma Thunder

Coach Mark Daigneault

Semifinal Practice Day



Q. You've referenced recently being in this environment last year you felt was extremely beneficial to the team. Moving forward through that season, kind of in the spirit of what you've talked about in terms of rebuilding the habits from the ground up, do you feel like once again some of the things that you're experiencing here can pay dividends as the season goes along?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, we're a little more familiar obviously this time around. It was new to us last year. But I do think it helped us as we went through the playoffs, especially as we get to the Conference Finals and Finals because of the schedule and the media attention and stuff like that.

Yeah, this time around, they feel like elevated regular-season games. You have a handful of those every year, probably 10 to 15 of them, that just feel a little bit higher in terms of the atmosphere around the game. I think those are helpful as check-ins. This setting certainly provides that.

Q. Just wanted to ask you about the matchup tomorrow, sounding like Victor Wembanyama might play, and just wonder kind of your assessment of the Spurs at this point with and without him.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, they have had great start. We haven't seen them yet. So it's a first pass at them, and we'll see where we are at against them. We're not going to overprepare or overdo anything. First time we've seen them, and go out there and play and see where that leaves us. We'll see them a few times here in the next couple weeks, so --

Q. It wasn't what I was going to ask, but since you said it, I want to ask about it. You said there's 10 or 15 elevated regular-season games a year. It feels like you've played 25. You're getting a level of effort from every opponent that is worthy of when the champions come to town. Have you noticed that -- does it seem different this year when you go into an arena as the defending champ?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: More the same than different. It certainly seems different than it did five years ago, that's for sure, just with the way our team has progressed. We are in our third year of being a pretty good team, and it's grown over time.

But those are good experiences. Like I said, they prepare you as you -- if you are in a playoff spot, they prepare you for those types of games, and your team gets more and more used to them. Even just watching us move in this environment year over year, just a lot of growth in that period of time.

So those games help you, these types of situations help you. We try to make the most of them if we can.

Q. The question I did want to ask was, I know you guys don't skip steps and you pride yourselves on all of that, but a team that comes off the run like you had last year, and then a bunch of guys get contracts, and it's all wonderful. They are playing harder, it looks like, this year, and that doesn't always happen. What is it about this group that is willing to focus on today and not what you've already done?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: They are pretty internally motivated as professionals and as competitors. I think that's got a lot to do with it. They don't require the external motivations. They just want to compete. They enjoy competing together. I think that matters, especially in a long season. They love being together. They seem to have more energy when they are around each other, whether it's game or practice, and that brings energy to a season that can be mundane otherwise.

I think that's a huge thing. I don't think it's more complicated than that. They love competing and they love doing it together.

Q. I know you guys have been through this last year and being back here again. Next year, the semifinal will be, in theory, Oklahoma City, the way the shift changed it around. Do you like that change, and do you think it's good that if you are the No. 1 seed that you get an extra home game and get to play in front of

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your home fans and get to come here for a championship game after that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, I think it's a good change by them, and it's further incentive. They want these Cup games to be elevated. Obviously the cash prize does that. The difference of branding or whatever does that. They are on TV. They are isolated to certain nights. They have done a nice job there.

But I think it's further incentive to really go after those games if you can potentially get an extra home game out of it, for sure.

Q. How is Hartenstein doing coming off of his calf? And with him and Chet, they have still played a pretty small amount of time together. How much room to grow is there in that dynamic?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: He's doing well. He's progressing.

And then, there's room to grow. I think the 5 is a very different position than not the 5. I'm not sure the 4 and the 3 are different positions at this point in the NBA, but the 5 is different.

Chet's entire first year was at the 5, and then adding Hart gave us the opportunity to shift him to some 4. But that season was cut short by a lot of games because of the injury. So it has been a small sample size.

Chet has done a great job of just adapting to those changes on both ends of the floor. Changes his defense, too. Changes who he is guarding. The other night he starts at 5, he's on Mark Williams. If Hart is in that game, he's guarding somebody different, Royce O'Neale or something like that.

He's done a great job adapting to it. But he's got a lot of runway. He is still a young player and has missed some time, so he's still getting better. But we think putting him in those different environments is a good thing for him and to have to adapt to those things.

Q. With Dub coming off the wrist surgery, what have you seen in terms of progress for him just since he has been back on the floor, and how do you think he is handling the challenge of really having to remake his jump shot playing in NBA games?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I don't think he is at full capacity yet. I don't want to speak for him, but that's what my eyes are telling me. I think he has room to go in terms of finding his rhythm and working himself back in.

However, he is at full capacity as a competitor and as a team guy. That's what's been impressive. Similar to Chet last year, he is hopping on a moving train and a team that has played very well with him out, and he has come in and only been additive to that. The way he has competed and the way he has played inside the team, it's allowed the other guys that have played well while he is out to continue to play at a high level. Chet and Ajay Mitchell come to mind. A lot of the role players come to mind. That's a credit to him. It shows great awareness and great team orientation.

Q. Just to piggyback on the health situation, could you talk about Nikola Topic's recovery and the plan in the future months for him?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, the plan right now is for him to handle his treatment and to handle where he is at, which is obviously a serious matter but one that he is handling as well as anybody -- any person, never mind an 18- or 19-year-old person, can handle. He showed tremendous maturity last season, watching him go through an ACL recovery. That's a long time.

There's a lot of invisible work. There's a lot of days that are kind of in the shadows, and you learn a lot about guys when they go through that. He showed unbelievable capacity there. Now this is obviously a more serious situation with his health, and he has only shown the same maturity.

He is an incredible person. Shows unbelievable character. He is very unassuming. He doesn't want this to be about him. He is additive when he is around the team. He is putting the work in where he can physically so that when he comes out of it, he is in the best possible position physically.

But he has done a great job. He is right where he should be. He is doing great. The guys have been great with him. He has been great with the guys. It's been a very humbling situation to watch because he has handled it just beautifully.

Q. Last season was the first experience for everybody with this event in Las Vegas and how it was going to go. Do you sense any different business approach coming back to Vegas this time around?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, I think just more familiarity and assuredness. I don't want to say confidence, but more assuredness. Being back in the same environment year over year, like I said, you can kind of feel the amount of growth. We've had a lot of experience since then. We've had a 23-game playoff run plus the rest of the regular

season last year, the start of the season this year.

Definitely feel a little bit of difference in our team. But that's been the case all year. I think when you play 23 playoff games, as young as this team was, you can't help but grow. I think that has been evident.

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