

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Sam will have just a brief comment and then we'll go directly into questions.

SAM PRESTI: Well, first just want to thank everyone for joining us this evening, especially on short notice like this. I just want to begin by saying how appreciative we are of Billy and all his contributions to the organization over the last five years. He did a great job for us. We have just the utmost respect for him.

The things that he did here will be remembered for a very long time, and I think he'll be regarded as somebody that really helped the organization move forward, and I think he's really helped the legacy of the organization as we moved into the back end of our first decade.

I can't thank him enough and his family. They are a tremendous part of the community. Disappointed that we weren't able to ultimately sort it out, but wish him nothing but the best and think he's going to do a great job wherever it is that he chooses to coach next.

He'll always be a member of the Thunder organization, and I think he did an exceptional job while he was here.

Q. Obviously we go through the press release with a fine-tooth comb and whatnot, and the part where you say it became apparent we couldn't provide him with the information on the future direction of the team over the next several seasons to give him the level of clarity that he understandably desires at this stage of his career. What information was Billy looking for in regard to the future of the team, and what can you tell us about the clarity that he desired in those conversations?

SAM PRESTI: Well, first of all, I would say that the conversations that we've had over time have been extraordinarily productive. Even the conversation we had most recently when he let me know that he felt like it was the right time, it was going to be a hard thing to work out. I actually brought a cooler, and once I -- because I thought



that might be the direction we were headed.

We had a couple beers in my office and talked about the last five years and just kind of reminisced over some of the real high points and also some of the low points that we experienced.

But I wouldn't say it's anything specific. I think it's just the understanding that even if I could give him an idea of the way things would look this current year, at the end of the day, what does it look like over the next two to three years, that's the kind of thing that I don't think that we're in a position to be able to forecast.

And so in knowing where he is and the caliber of coach that he is, I wouldn't want to mislead him and tell him it was going to be a certain way and then have it not be that way. But ultimately it was also five years, and I think in his mind it may have been time to move on. I totally respect that and I have a great deal of respect for him, and I wish him nothing but the best.

Q. First thing I've got to know is what kind of beer was it?

SAM PRESTI: Cheap. Yeah, I brought -- well, if you know Billy, you've got to have a Diet Coke. So I had two Diet Cokes and two beers. I thought I ended up drinking the two beers. He actually had one. When you work closely with somebody for five years and you go through a lot of the things that we went through together, I'm just really grateful I got a chance to work with him.

I think he's a great guy, he's a great coach, and sometimes the arc of things just don't align. That's no one's fault, and his contributions here will live on for a long time. But it was cheap beer.

Q. You said a second ago that there were just some things that you weren't able to forecast in those conversations. If you could go back and sort of take this pandemic out of the equation, do you think you would have been able to forecast, or is that largely the issue here?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. I mean, look, I don't want to sound -- I don't want to sound like trite here, but the pandemic is a huge issue for the NBA in terms of just forecasting things,



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and the reality is that we are working in a situation and we don't know when our season will start next season.

We don't understand yet economically the impact of this situation on any team, let alone ours, in terms of revenues. We also don't have any idea of what the salary cap or luxury tax is going to be.

I think all of you guys that cover the NBA realize that that is the absolute -- you can't really -- those are the rules of the game. You can't really do anything or make any decisions or even hypothetically forecast anything without that information because you can't create a measurement of value, let alone for one season, let alone the future seasons.

So the pandemic is a huge factor, and I think it is for a lot of -- will be for a lot of teams. We're waiting for that information. When we get that information, it'll at least inform us to be able to determine what our options are, what we'd like to do.

But it's truly something we have to wait on, so yeah, I don't want to make it sound like it's an obvious thing, but it's really a huge factor in terms of scenario planning or providing a lot of deep insights.

Q. Sam, going back to the beginning of your actual first press conference, all the way back to the beginning of the season, you had mentioned that you had hoped to be playing meaningful basketball at the end of the season. I don't know if you foresaw this team going all the way to a Game 7 against the Rockets, but how much of this season the way it ended up going, how much of it do you see as a luxury for the young players that you will have more than likely moving forward with the franchise because they were playing meaningful minutes at the end of the Game 7, they were playing meaningful minutes at the end of the season, and not just your prototypical tank season?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, well, I think we came into the season with that expectation of playing meaningful games, and one thing I do want to clarify is the outcome of the season had, from our point of view, had no bearing on our interest in having Billy back.

We would have loved to have had him back and appreciate him greatly. I think we were pretty clear about that before the Playoffs started, and I wanted to make sure that that was clear.

But in respect to the experience that those guys have received, playing in meaningful games was -- we didn't

know when we came into the season what kind of year we were going to have, and we say that every year, that we don't place expectations on the team because that's the beauty of sports, it's the beauty of basketball and competition.

Look, we got a lot of really clutch play at the end of games. I mean, historically good level of clutch play. Chris Paul was just on another level in the last two minutes of games.

And so our younger players have certainly benefitted from his leadership and his mentoring as well as the environments they were put in positions to play. Guys stepped up throughout the year and improved, and that's generally what happens for younger players. When they receive opportunity, they're going to improve month by month. If you evaluate them game by game you're going to be frustrated, but if you can block it out into bigger chunks and really try to evaluate progress and were guys off track and how you can correct it, I thought our coaching staff did a great job with that during the season. I'm happy that those guys got to play in that environment.

Now, it is a bubble environment, so I don't know if we'll be playing in that again, but it's certainly a lot different than playing in front of 18,000 people. That was their first playoff experience, but at some point in the future you'd like to hope that they'd get a playoff experience that's in front of fans.

Q. Just wondering, I know you've had conversations throughout; are you surprised at all to come to this -- just given how well everything went with him, is it a surprise to you?

SAM PRESTI: Not a lot surprises me in the NBA. You know, I think one thing that we all understand, I don't mean just the people in Oklahoma City but all 30 teams, like the NBA has become a league of change, and it happens rapidly, and so you have to embrace that. You have to understand that change is additive. Instead of resisting it, I think you have to embrace it. That's a big part of professional sports today.

You know, I don't see it as a negative all the time because a lot of times when things happen that we maybe hope didn't happen, there's something else that happens that's waiting in the wings at some point in the future. You've got to stick with things and you have to look for the opportunities and stay optimistic.

But things happen in this league that are unforeseen. In this particular case, none of us have a crystal ball, and so I'm just really proud of the fact that Billy coached here and gave us five great seasons and I know had a great impact

on a lot of people. I'm obviously disappointed that it didn't line up for everybody, but I look back on that period of time very fondly and think about some of the big games we were in and the performances that we had, even just some of the things from this past season. I thought it was a great year.

But I'm not -- I wouldn't say I'm surprised. I think these things happen. People move on, and he was here for half a decade and did a great job. It just wasn't meant to be a longer stay, unfortunately.

Q. I was curious, have you been in contact with any of the players yet, and what's the process in terms of talking with them about where you're going to go from there or just letting them know that Billy is not coming back?

SAM PRESTI: Well, Billy and I talked about it, and I wanted him to have the opportunity to talk to those guys. I think he was going to start to reach out to those guys this evening. I don't know if he got to everybody. And I'm sure I'll talk to the players over the next few days, as well. We're coming out of such a unique situation in the bubble. We've really given -- everyone has kind of just done what they should be doing right now, which is go home, be with their family, reconnect and reunite with their family, understand what it's like to get back into a normal -- or I guess the current normal life, the non-bubble life, and we'll talk to all those guys and we'll move on from there.

But I thought when Billy and I talked, I thought it would be great if he was able to speak to those guys first.

Q. When it comes to players, do they really care? I know they liked Billy, they liked playing for him, but is the bottom line most places, does it really matter to them who's coaching?

SAM PRESTI: I think that's a pretty broad question. I think it does, but I couldn't speak for the guys. I couldn't speak for the players, and I wouldn't want to speak for the players. I don't want to venture into that. I think everybody will have their own thought process and their own opinions, and some of those get shared and some of those don't.

I don't know how players in general feel, but I'm sure that everybody enjoyed playing for Billy, and I'm sure they have a good fondness and good memories of his time here.

Q. Sam, as far as the part in the release that Billy was saying how -- didn't have the information he needed about what the future might look like, how much of that was centered on roster complexion for next season and beyond, particularly about guys like Chris and

other veterans on the roster and what it could signal about kind of the broader scale future?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I would say that over the course of time as we were having conversations, it was just hard for us to forecast the next two to three years, just given where we are as a team. I think this next season we don't know the answer to that because of what I said earlier. We don't know where the cap and tax is going to be. We don't have a good feel for really any information that you would need to make informed decisions.

We can speculate all you want, but until you have that information, there's no way you can make any determination. So we're kind of in like a waiting game there.

But I think it's more just overall; know what I mean? I wish I could say, here's where things would transition or might transition, but what I think is important is you have open, candid conversation and not mislead anyone. Because I would not want that to be the case that we say, hey, here's how we think it's going to go and then it doesn't go that way.

But I don't think Billy was demanding anything in any way, shape, or form. It's just I think we're at a point in time where we may bring this team back for this season. I don't know what that would mean beyond the season, you know, the one that's upcoming.

The seasons after that, we're just at that point in time as a franchise and organization. I don't think that's a big thing., I just think that we're not in a position to make those kinds of determinations even for the current season, but I think especially for the future, as well.

Q. Given that no coach could have those assurances given all the question marks, how much does that complicate the search for a new coach and getting someone to buy into that?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's totally -- I think it's very specific. I wouldn't say it's a broad thing. I think everybody is going to look at things differently. Billy I think is going to have plenty of options and will evaluate them as to what's best for him, which I think he should do, and I think that's the right thing to do. And I think every person is going to look at every situation through their own lens.

You know, I don't think it's like a one broad thing. I think in this particular case, I think he'll have other opportunities that may be more -- just a little more certainty in terms of what that's going to look like beyond the next season. And I respect that completely.

Q. You've been through coaching changes before, and as you were saying, days like today can be emotional. I'm just curious, what does your tomorrow typically look like? What are the next two or three days like for you in these types of situations?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, over 10 years, really only been through two. We had two -- we've had two coaches over the last 10 years, so I don't have a ton of familiarity with them.

But we'll take a step back, and as I said before, without understanding when the season is going to start or any of that information, we're not going to be rushing through anything, although we're not generally that way in most of our decision making anyway.

And we'll just kind of outline what the process will be and look for some of the traits that I think all of you guys probably will kind of anticipate we'd look for, and quite frankly a lot of things that Billy represented in some fashion, as well.

I'm really proud of the fact that Scott started here and obviously Billy came here, did an excellent job and built on what Scott did, and my hope is that the next person will come in and build on what Scott and Billy did and that we'll continue forward and hopefully find somebody that leaves the type of impact and legacy that those two coaches brought to Oklahoma City.

Q. I know it's too early to think about the potential coaches to replace Billy, but can you talk about some of the qualities that you will be looking for in a new coach?

SAM PRESTI: You know, I think what I'm really going to focus on this evening is more -- kind of just reflecting on what Billy did for the organization and how much appreciation we have for him. I don't want to kind of get into that because a lot of times what happens, when you start doing that, people start to see that as like a comparison with the person that was just there.

I'd rather just say that we want to obviously have somebody that's a great fit for the organization and someone that is going to be really passionate about coaching the Thunder, just like Scotty and Billy were. But I'm not going to kind of get into that beyond that because I think it's more important to recognize what Billy did for the Thunder and the many games that he led them on the floor.

Q. Sam, you mentioned you don't want to talk about

the qualities in the next coach, but how about a timetable? Seems like you might have roster decisions to make prior to bringing somebody in. When would you like for that to happen?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I would go back to what I said earlier, which is that any reference to a timetable would be news to us because we don't know -- we don't even know the rules, per se, of the game relative to the cap and tax. We don't know when the season is going to start. If you have that information, I would love to have it because it would be really helpful.

But I don't have that, and so we're going to take our time to work through all the different scenarios. But to be honest with you, it's kind of like spinning wheels because we don't know -- we don't have anything to line everything up to relative to the cap, tax, and even timeline for playing.

Q. Is it conceivable that the coach could be the first decision in whatever decisions are in front of you?

SAM PRESTI: I haven't thought that much about it, to be honest with you. I wouldn't rule anything out. I think it's a fair question. But I wish I could answer that question for you. I haven't really thought about it, to be honest with you.

Q. Sam, in talking about the fact that since you guys have been in Oklahoma City, you've only had two head coaches essentially; PJ obviously started. But to have two head coaches that have been here essentially splitting the time, that's pretty rare. Can you kind of put that in perspective from where you sit? To have only really had two guys that have been head coaches the whole time you've been here and just how -- that seems rare in the NBA.

SAM PRESTI: It is. I have a great affinity for both those guys, and I've learned a lot from both of them, quite frankly. And that's what people you work with should be doing for you. I learned so much from Scott Brooks, and I learned a lot from Billy Donovan, as well, and I really value what those guys gave to the organization.

I don't think people have a great understanding of just how challenging that job is. It's a very challenging job. It's a complex job.

In any situation, there's going to be a lot of adversity over a five-year period of time, and both those guys were here for about that period. I'd just like to think that when that kind of stuff comes up, you stick with things and you try to stick with people. I generally feel like if you stick with people that there's going to be some benefits for that, and also I



think relationships get built that way.

Look, I'll be the first to tell you, with Scott and Billy, we didn't always agree on everything. I mean, that would be crazy to think that. But like dealing man-to-man, professional, working through things, learning about each other, sticking with things, I'm really proud of that. I hope we can find somebody else in the future that has that type of tenure. You know, it's half a decade. Hopefully the next person will be here even longer.

But you have to accept that change is part of this, and uncertainty does rear its head. But I really -- we've had those two guys who were really solid coaches and they're really solid people, and I think that's a big part of it.

I really appreciate the question because sometimes -- I didn't anticipate that one. But I hold those guys in high regard, and I think the next person, whoever that person is, will share some of the qualities of each of them, and we'll see who that person is.

I think the number one thing is always having a passion for Oklahoma City and having a passion for the Thunder and the organization. Hopefully we can find someone else that can carry on the work that those guys did.

Q. Sam, just a quick question, for the next guy coming in, how much say will he be able to have over the roster and personnel decisions as far as who he may want and what types of players he'd like to see brought in?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, I think with Billy and Scott, we always talk about all those things. The tough reality of it is that you may all want the same thing, but unfortunately it's not like walking down a grocery store and just picking things off the aisle.

A lot of things you have to work with the parameters that you have and what's available because it's not fantasy basketball.

It's interesting because we've done a lot of internal exercises and things in terms of how we value different things, and it's remarkable how aligned those things are. But team building and coaching are such complex things, it's not as easy as just going out and getting. We'd all like to have the same things, it's just whether or not you can get those things and then working with what you have to maximize it the best you can.

And especially with Billy, I think he was so involved in a lot of our free agency stuff, I think he saw that stuff happening up close, would be like, well, I'd love to have this, but that

person just got like \$20 million, and we don't have that type of money for that position.

You know, you work with things, and I feel really good about -- I think Dennis is a good example of somebody that we really thought about and felt like would make a lot of sense and were able to find a way to get him over time. But you're always talking to the coach and the coaching staff, picking their brains, trying to figure things out. But you're also trying to work within the parameters and kind of the supply and demand that is team building.

Does that answer your question?

Q. Yeah, about as good as it can. I think I was more looking at as far as them wanting to build a particular team even if the money wasn't there, if it was just a particular type of player. Who makes the ultimate decision, is that you or them?

SAM PRESTI: Well, you're working collaboratively. You're trying to figure out what makes sense, what works, where is the game going, what do you have to give up to get that, what sacrifices are you making.

But I think everyone is looking for the same players in the NBA. Like that's not a -- I don't think there's like a secret to that. I think people can generally see that. That's not really a complicated thing. The complicated thing is if everybody is looking for the same thing, the value of that goes extraordinarily high, and then you have to start looking for more alternative ways to supplement or complement or develop or find your own kind of niche and things.

That's what makes the NBA great. There's just not a high supply of the top-tier guys that can do everything, and you're going to have to work with some imperfection. But I think that's what a good organization to me has to be able to work through, is finding the things and cultivating those undervalued players or finding ways to use people differently.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone, for joining us this evening.

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