

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti

Press Conference



SAM PRESTI: Appreciate everybody waiting to hear from me this evening. I know it's late.

As I think everybody knows at this point -- I really can't say a whole lot about anything, really, relative to any transactions that we intend to make. We've all been through this many times. But I do think it's important to obviously address you guys. You're such a huge role in covering the team and communicating to our fans.

I'll be happy to answer any questions that I'm able to legally, per the rules.

I'd just like to begin by just saying just what an incredible group of people I have the privilege to work with with this organization. Each time we have a draft night, obviously a lot of time culminates into one singular day, but the teamwork of the staff up and down the entire organization, but especially with the scouting department and the strategy group and the medical group, everyone involved in the draft, just it's really a special thing to be a part of, and I feel so privileged to work with -- I can't name them all, but obviously you know that Will Dawkins and Rob Hennigan and Amanda Green and Jesse Gould and Wynn Sullivan, and I could go down the list of people, are just pivotal people in our organization. You can't run a draft without that type of teamwork.

I also would say that it was a pretty unique situation just because of the parameters that COVID presents. We had tremendous contributions from our IT group tonight and our medical group tonight, just to keep the environment in a way that allowed everyone to partake in it safely.

Again, just a lot of collaboration, a lot of teamwork. It was great to have Mark with us for his first draft as the head coach of the team. It was just really cool to watch his interaction with everybody, and I already see the positive benefits that we're going to get from him in this role.

As far as the day, I would just say that it's a continuation of the things that we've talked about since last summer, which is continually trying to reposition the team after 12 years of

extremely high performance results, and ultimately continuing to try to replenish our flexibility and tools for us to continue to build a platform for an elite team going forward but full well knowing that that's going to take time.

But we're really excited about some of the things we've been able to accomplish, but have a, very, very long road ahead of us in order to ultimately build a sustainable team capable of elite performance.

We're also really excited about the season starting and getting a chance to see some of the new players that we'll ultimately have on the floor and for the community to get to know them.

But again, all that has to go through the league office and all the administration that has to happen. I'll do my best to answer your questions from here and kind of let you guys take it away.

Q. I don't even know if you can answer this or how much you can answer this, but I'll ask. What were the goals and the things you were trying to address going into tonight from a roster standpoint, from the draft standpoint?

SAM PRESTI: I think I can answer that. I think, like any draft, period, you're looking to generate value for the organization. That can be future value or present value. You're looking to create options for yourself as a team. I think I've probably said this before, but the draft is a dynamic exercise where things are constantly changing within five-minute increments, and then in the second round in a shorter amount of time.

We were looking to add value to the organization and continue to work ourselves into repositioning and replenishing our team after 12 years of running it pretty hard.

There's a million things that you're trying to accomplish, but if you can get just a couple things to go your way, it's usually a pretty good night.

The toughest thing about the draft, I think, is the realization that very few amount of the players that are drafted on any given draft really are going to go on to become impact players, and quite frankly once you get outside of the top

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few picks, like the odds really start to shrink quite a bit that you're going to find elite talent.

You know, you do your best to kind of shift the odds in your favor to try to find someone that can be an NBA player. Finding NBA players is really hard, especially on the first try. The more opportunities you have at that, generally the better.

So we were just looking to try to find guys that we thought could grow in our program that fit the profile, and I wouldn't say any specific positions or things like that so much as like trying to find guys we thought could continue to thrive here.

Q. I know speaking of generalities, I don't want you to get into any trouble, but I'm curious, you've been a longtime proponent, gone out and got guys from the international scene. Has that -- here stateside we don't really have a good gauge on how that scene has changed. Have you seen it evolve? Is what you're seeing now and evaluating now, is it different than it was a decade or more ago?

SAM PRESTI: Oh, that is such a great question. The reason I say that, it brings back unbelievable memories from when I first started in San Antonio. I spent a lot of time over there, and I used to go over and I used to call R.C. Buford after like two weeks, and I was young, I was like 25 years old, 24 years old, and I was just like, hey, if I stay another week, I can see Boris Diaw and I can see Beno Udrih and I could just work myself, and before I knew it I'd be over there for like a month plus and just bouncing around from place to place.

It's really an unbelievable life experience. I am so fortunate in so many ways to be a part of basketball, but the fact that it allowed me to see a big part of the world that I probably would never have gotten to see and meet people and have these unbelievable relationships that I've been able to experience as a result of it has been awesome.

How has it changed? I still love going over there. I just don't get to do it as much as I used to. When we traded for Gallinari, I told him about a story when I saw him in the draft, that's how -- he was young, and he hit a really big shot at the end of the game, and he carried the flag of the team in Milan around, and it just was -- some of the atmospheres there are just awesome, and I have great memories.

But I mean, I don't think it's changed a great deal. I think that the economy does play a big role over there, quite frankly, in how the teams can work and function. Sponsorship is such an important part to those leagues.

The economics play a big role in the competitiveness of the teams.

So I've seen that change quite a bit.

But there are great players overseas and great American players that are playing overseas that absolutely can play in the NBA. There's a lot of talent over there. But I can't say that there's one thing that's changed, but I just think there's really good players all over the world, and we're seeing that all the time in the NBA.

Q. Do you feel like with some of those changes and maybe the economics we'll see it most coming out of the pandemic, I don't know, but do you see the evaluation of players in overseas leagues, has that become more difficult, less difficult? How have you seen that evolve as the years have gone?

SAM PRESTI: Well, that's a great question. I think one thing we just don't know going forward is -- and I think this draft is affected by it, as well. Traveling is a lot more difficult, and I think people are going to be thinking really carefully about how travel works and how to travel and certainly overseas travel, as well.

I mean, there's all kinds of events and camps and FIBA events every summer. Those are the greatest -- to me, again, going to watch the under-16 B division in Bulgaria, like that used to be like heaven to me when I was coming up scouting. Those tournaments are still going on, but obviously those have been halted as a result of everything going on in the world.

I do think that it's a new day in so many ways. Just thinking about the technology and what we're using -- I'm smiling and I'm going to tell you why I'm smiling. The draft tonight, we had screens up with the scouts in certain rooms and different people kind of -- screens positioned so you could see different people, and then we normally have a projector that has some different charts and things that we're looking at during the draft, and the fan in the projector broke and started making this horrible noise, and we kind of lost the screen for a little bit.

It just shows you the resourcefulness of the guys and girls, we were able to get it shifted over to a TV. We really audibled and put the draft on a different screen, but we had this horrible noise going through most of the second round, and the IT guy, Tyler, was like on the conference room table like trying to get the fan to stop, and Glenn, who is like my right hand and basically like my brother, he's my right-hand man, he was up there trying to get the fan to stop.

I don't think Will Dawkins flinched, so we were in good shape. But yeah, the technology of everything and all the adjustments that we had to make through this period of time has been remarkable as well as all these rules we have for the protocols and just to have training camp. That's where someone like -- these are people you hear enough about, but like Amanda Green and Joe Connaughton, they really drive our legal process. They're reading these memos and making sure we're following all the different protocols.

It's been a learning process for us all, but it's made me realize how lucky I am to work with a group of people that are so adaptable, so selfless and so committed, and I really am so grateful for that.

Q. By the way, that projector fan said welcome to 2020.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we didn't know what the noise was. It's probably a sign of we could probably upgrade there. That was probably an indication that we need a little upgrading. Or when the NBA -- you can tell it's late because I'm kind of delirious. The NBA wanted to put a camera in our conference room, and we just didn't have the technology for it. I mean, it wasn't first on my list anyway, but it was -- I was actually happy when Matt told me, we can't even do it.

So yeah, we can probably upgrade that area, but I also think there's something about kind of doing the draft in the same kind of environment pretty regularly, and we have a pretty consistent system, although tonight there had to be less people in the room. That was probably the biggest adjustment, but we found a way to make them feel present with the screens.

Q. I think you might be able to talk a little bit about the one transaction that was officially announced, the trade with Phoenix and the young guys Kelly Oubre and Jalen Lecque and Ty Jerome and the 2022 draft pick. Just curious if you had any thoughts you could share on that transaction.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I mean, we're excited about those guys and think they're all going to bring something unique to the table. Obviously really appreciative and grateful for all the contributions that Chris and Abdul gave to our team. Chris left a legacy in our organization in a very brief amount of time.

It's a really special time for him and for us, and I just couldn't be happier for the success that he found here, and I think he's going to do just a marvelous job uplifting the Phoenix group and impacting them.

Abdul, I also want to make sure I acknowledge because he -- this guy, he's a hard worker. We traded for him right before he was going to be waived, and he's worked himself into being a really solid NBA player.

As far as the new guys, we're really excited about those guys, as well, and think that there's upside to all of them in different ways. Looking forward to getting them here and getting them on the floor with all of our guys.

You know, that was one that came together, and we felt like it was probably the best thing for all parties, and I think it was a great deal for Phoenix, as well.

Q. I'm curious about obviously everything with this draft is different because of COVID. Can you give us an idea of how the room was set up, how many people were there and sort of how you guys decided to do that safely and efficiently?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I'm trying to think how we started it. It was really one of our scouts named Ryan Lambert that I kind of tasked with, figure this out, because we were also working on so many other things. He engaged Donnie Strack from our medical group, and we figured out where the guidelines were.

Within the normal room that we use, we usually pack ourselves in there pretty deep, and just because I like to -- traditionally like to have the people that pound the pavement all year to be in the room and feel the room a little bit and be accessible for questions or things like that.

We obviously couldn't do that this year, so we came -- Donnie and Ryan and a couple other people came up with the decision -- let's see, how many people were in there? I think we had seven people in that room. I think we had five in the bullpen, and then a few more in theater. All those people that were in the separate rooms were on basically like a Zoom call, so they could see everything that was happening with us and we could see them, and they just were muted so that it wasn't like a million people talking at the same time.

But our mics were open -- our mic was open, so it was like they were there I would say. I'm trying to think if there's anything else about it. You know, everyone was distanced. And we had some scouts that didn't travel in from -- we had some international scouts that were watching that would normally be here. Massimo Biasin, who lives in Italy, has been with us since 2008, so he was -- gosh, I can't imagine what time of night it was for him actually now that I think about it. He did get kind of quiet in the second round now that I think about it.

But yeah, we made it work, but yeah, there were some people that were remote, not in the building.

Q. If I understand NBA rules, you could talk all night if you wanted to about Immanuel Quickley, Jaden McDaniels and Cassius Winston.

SAM PRESTI: I could. I could do that.

Q. I'm really not interested in Quickley and McDaniels, but what can you tell us about Winston, and is my knowledge of your roster -- it would seem like you had a bunch of point guards last year and now you don't. Are the Phoenix guys, Jerome and Baby Westbrook and Cassius Winston, all three, candidates to be the backup point guard?

SAM PRESTI: So we actually don't -- Cassius is not going to be with us, so he's part of something else. I thought you were just interested in him actually.

Q. No, I think that's news I must have slept through here.

SAM PRESTI: I have no idea what's like reported and what's not reported.

Q. If he's not going to be here, my interest is minimal. Let's put it that way.

SAM PRESTI: Do you want another question because this was the last one, so I think it's only fair that you get another one.

Q. Yeah. Tell us about Jerome and Baby Westbrook.

SAM PRESTI: Ty Jerome is a very, very skilled and very cerebral player. He is like a dogged worker and just a guy that really understands the game at an extremely high level. And he's a great shooter, so he does a lot of things well.

Lecque is a young player with tremendous, tremendous athleticism. He's got a lot of force to his game. I remember watching him in a prep school tournament not last year but I guess the year before up in Connecticut, and just really just a real powerful athlete, aggressive, confident. I'm looking forward to getting to know him a little bit better.

But again, he's a young player, and we have to get him here and kind of get a baseline to where he is with everything, get a sense of what the plan will be for him.

As I said before, I do think it's -- draft night is such a good reminder of this for me. It's just -- you think all these guys get picked, but there's only going to be a few of them that go on to be really good players, and there will be a few more that become high-level role players. But there's 60 guys picked every year, but there's not 60 guys leading out of the NBA every year. So it's hard to make it.

It's hard to find players, and I've said this many, many times, like we've had some work out for us and we've had a lot of them that haven't. In order to get a few right, you have to be willing to realize that you're going to get a bunch wrong.

A big part of that is, I think, one, just giving yourself as many opportunities as possible to find players that can stick, and some players can do great in one place and not great in another.

There's a lot of different factors that go into it. Some of it's opportunity, sometimes it could be injury, sometimes it could be maturity, sometimes it could be you had somebody in front of you that plays the same position and you don't get a chance to get out there. There's just can be so many things. A lot of things have to line up for things to go right.

I think you think about where we were not this time last year but at the last draft, I'm sure somebody asked me about Lu Dort. But I could never have told you that Lu Dort was going to be starting on the team the next year. I remember getting those questions about Sabonis when we drafted him, and Baz, even Bazley.

The guys that have fought through and become like rotation players or better in the NBA are easy to realize, but there's plenty of guys that don't succeed or may not succeed here initially.

We accept that. That's part of trying to identify players and talent, and a lot of it has to do with good fortune. I'll be the first one to say that.

But we're always trying to shift the odds with as much information as possible, and we're not afraid to take some risk. I think risk is an important part of trying to gain advantage, and we've always been willing to take some of that and realize that -- anyone that thinks you're going to be hitting like 50 percent is not really familiar with the NBA Draft or draft history in general. You're going to always be able to name a lot more guys that probably don't pan than do.

But if you can get a couple that can be with you for a really long time and help build a foundation, then you have a

chance to do something in this league that's really hard to do, which is sustain something. There's a lot of hard work that has to go into that and a lot of things have to line up.

I'll look forward to speaking to you when I can speak more about the things that we were able to do tonight. But I really do appreciate you guys sticking with us during the evening.

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