

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Thursday, May 20, 2021

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

## Sam Presti

### Press Conference

**SAM PRESTI:** Just want to thank everybody for joining us this morning. This is the conclusion of our 13th season of Thunder basketball in Oklahoma City. We're tremendously grateful for the opportunity to play in our state, and looking forward to speaking this morning about a lot of different things and taking as many questions as people have for us. I'll stay here until you guys are out of questions for me.

I want to just say, it's going to take me a little bit longer to get through a few comments earlier this morning just because of the amount of thank yous I really, really feel I need to hit, given the amount of people that helped us throughout the season in what was a very unique and changing landscape, and it would be impossible for us to have even had a season without a lot of those folks. So bear with me.

I also want to say we were extremely fortunate to play basketball this year. In no way, shape or form do we not recognize the hardships that so many people in our country and our state were going through as a result of the pandemic, so any challenges that we faced this year were infantile compared to the things that so many people were going through.

I don't want that to be misunderstood as we go through and talk about some of the challenges of the season. We're very lucky and very fortunate compared to some of the hardships that were taking place.

I really, really want to start by thanking the medical professionals that helped us throughout the year. The testers were just a source of consistency. The total test number I had pulled for me before I did this, and from the start of training camp to the last day of the regular season, we did 14,325 COVID tests on our players and staff. For those of you scoring at home, that's close to 29,000 Q-tips and a lot of people coming together to make that happen.

Our testers were great. They were part of our team photo this year. We gave them all jerseys. We had them on the road with us. Just a tremendous group of people.



One thing I've learned from this experience is that if you know somebody that has been helping in the medical field during the pandemic, saying thank you goes an incredibly long way. Take the time to do that. These people have sacrificed quite a bit, as well, in order to keep a lot of us safe, and I just think a tip of the cap to them really, really makes a difference.

I also want to thank the families of our players and the staff. What a lot of people may not realize is that our families were living under the same NBA protocols as the players and the staff themselves. So again, a significant amount of sacrifice made by our families to make sure that we were keeping the teams safe. I just don't think that can be underscored.

To our players and our player-facing staff, those that were in the bubble, those that were on the road this year, I have a tremendous amount of gratitude. Getting tested sometimes three times a day, we played four games a week in the second half of the schedule, that's everybody. Just the most dense schedule in the history of the NBA, even more than the lockout season.

Isolation on the road, you couldn't leave your hotel room until the very end of the season where you were allowed to take a walk twice a day. Couldn't eat on the plane. We had a mask compliance officer on the road with us who, again, became part of our family just like the testers.

We're very grateful to the players and the staff, but that's what it took. Every team had to make the same sacrifices. I'm just grateful for our players and our staff.

Now, on November 30th when I addressed the media prior to the start of the season, I said the number one priority for us during the season would be the health and safety of our players and our staff, and I'm proud to say that as a result of all these people pulling together and the discipline they showed off the floor, we did not have a single COVID positive case for our players or our coaches during the season.

In addition to that, we didn't suffer any career-altering injuries that could have derailed some of our players' careers as a result of the shortened off-season and the schedule. We're very, very grateful for that.



Everything we suffered were just predictable overuse injuries that were going to happen given the schedule we had to play and the shortened off-season. These are just things we've got to deal with and we've got to get through.

I also said at the beginning of the year that we would have to be extraordinarily adaptable. I feel that we were. We adapted. We adjusted. We weren't complaining. We were looking at every one of these opportunities, not just to get through the season, but to actually get better, and I think the conditions actually helped that. It's a positive. Obviously I don't think we were looking forward to having to play in those conditions again, but I think we learned a ton, and I think our group really grew as a result of the conditions, and we found some things we can do that we can take forward with us.

Also, I really, really want to thank our fans. I know this was obviously a tough year. It was very, very hard to play without them.

The easy decision economically would have been to open the doors. I'm proud of the fact that we acted in what we felt was the best interest of not just our fans but also our community at large. The timing of the decision as to when we actually made the final call on that -- and a lot of thought went into it -- at that point in time, the state was averaging about 684 cases per day. Reference that with the cases today, and those are roughly around 138. So we saw an 80 percent drop from the point in time that we made that decision.

Clearly it's not a result of that decision, but I do think that as the Thunder, we always hold ourselves out to be standing for more than what it is that we do, and I'm proud of the fact that we put our people first. We don't look at our fans as patrons, we look at them as people, and not only those folks but the people that they come in contact with are important to us.

I say this all the time: There are a lot of people in Oklahoma that may not care that much about the Thunder, but what I can tell you was this decision was our expression that we do care about you, and that's a really important thing in a small market, and that's the position that we took, and I'm proud that the organization decided to do that.

I want to also thank the media. You guys, even though I can't see you right now and I wish we were all sitting in a room together like old times, but you guys did an amazing job this year, as well. This was a hard year for you, primarily because there was no access. It was very hard for you guys.

But I thought the media did an excellent job of telling the story of our players, keeping our fans connected to the team, watching the growth of some of these younger people that are wearing our uniform now, and I feel like people got to know our players as people and players through the season, and it's a direct result of your work and your willingness to work with the conditions, as well. We're really appreciative of that.

Before I go on to anything else, I really want to thank Adam Silver in the NBA office. This was an unbelievably hard job that they had to manage. There's no precedent for playing in a pandemic. This was clearly a one-of-one situation, and the thing that I really was impressed with was they never were detached from the people or the real struggles that were taking place on the ground level, the people that were living by the protocols. That's not easy to do.

I think they realized that there was a certain level of empathy that was required, and I thought they did an excellent job with an imperfect set of circumstances.

I'm sure it was a very, very tough decision. If you think back to where we were before the season started, it was a real question whether or not we'd be able to even get started let alone finish, but it was the right decision to forge ahead and play, and we're very grateful for the way they managed the entire year for us and all the other teams.

I want to go over a few things from a team standpoint. I want to talk a little bit about the season that was, talk a little bit about the off-season and then just kind of wrap it up, and as I said before, I'll take all your questions as they come to me.

This past season I think anyone that watched the team, it was pretty clear it was kind of a tale of two seasons for us. We came into the year with the same mentality that we exhibited the year before. We wanted to kind of see what we had, see what the team did as the season unfolded. We did not want to place any limitations on the group, and I thought in the early part of the season we were pretty competitive. Most importantly, I thought we were really developing a style of play. I thought Mark and his staff did just an excellent job bringing the guys together, again, with very little training camp and no off-season.

I thought Shai took a tremendous jump this year, and we proved that we could compete with just about anyone. Obviously with about 28 games remaining in the season, our season took a pretty significant turn when Shai came up with a significant injury in his foot, and at that point we had to make a pretty rational, pragmatic decision and really turn and focus entirely on the development of our younger players.

I think anyone that's followed our team or has a pretty good handle on the league in general realizes that player development and the draft are really the lifeblood of a team like us in Oklahoma City, and having that time to explore the roster and give these younger players an opportunity was really, really critical for us.

You know, before the season, a lot of the questions that I got in the opening season press conference was how are you going to develop players without -- with all the protocols and all the limitations, and I thought it was a pretty good question when I think back on it. There was no G-League other than about 20 games, so two-thirds of the G-League was gone. We didn't really practice because of the protocols. You couldn't have team meetings, very little individual work.

So we had to find ways -- not to make excuses or say our hands were tied. We had to find ways to develop our players. It's the lifeblood of our organization if we want to have a sustainably great team one day, and I'm proud of the fact that we did that. Almost every single player we had got better through the season individually, and I think they grew both as players and professionals. I'll get into that a little bit later.

All that being said, with the type of season that we had, I think we accomplished a ton, and even after the year, we're still second over the last 10 -- I don't want to say -- yeah, since 2009, we have the second best record in the NBA. We packed a lot into this year, and I feel really good about the momentum it's provided us going into the off-season.

I'd like to talk just a little bit about Mark. I think he just did an excellent job. I thought his staff did an excellent job. I thought there was a significant amount of adjustments and adaptations that he had to make as a result of the changing landscape with the health and safety protocols, but I think it's going to pay dividends in the future.

In some ways I think having worked in the G-League really, really benefitted him because the G-League is full of all these types of twists and turns during a season anyway, and he just rolled with the punches and made the most of every situation.

One of my favorite stories of the year is we were out on the road, and I wasn't with the team, but someone sent me a picture and then told me the story. We couldn't have team meetings in the early part of the season because you couldn't be collected in a room together, even if you had masks on. Mark wanted to have a film session on the road. I think it was in between one of those home and

home games, kind of baseball series style games, and came up with the idea with all the other staff members pooling together their minds and creativity, and we ran about, I'm sure, 200 yards of extension cords and were able to have a film session outside. So you had basically a film room that was set up outside. We did that a few times during the year, weather permitting.

But that's the kind of creativity and those are some of the memories that I think we'll all remember as time goes on, reflect back on the season. So some ingenuity, some resourcefulness, some collaborations and teamwork, and some fun.

I thought the effort that we saw from the team was really, really special on a night-to-night basis. I think we all know the NBA has turned into kind of a three-point shooting exhibition on a night-to-night basis, makes it extremely exciting for fans. We were second in the league in contesting a three-point shot this season. As we know, that's one of the hardest things to do in the NBA with all the spacing today.

I think it was a great indication of the effort and how hard our guys played on a night-to-night basis. We were a young team, clearly. We were inexperienced on most nights that we played, but our effort and our stick-to-itiveness was exceptional.

One thing I'll always remember is we're on a road trip in Detroit and we were in a tough stretch, we had lost several games in a row, and the schedule was kind of piling up on us. We had a lot of young guys, and that can be hard for a young team mentally as well as physically just because they're playing so many more games.

The coaches had the players write up on the board, why are you playing? Why do you come to work every single day? Some of the answers were just remarkable. Some were, I play for my family, I play for the fans, I play for the tradition of the organization, the expectations that they have of us, and someone wrote up there, my worst day at work is someone else's dream.

I tell that story because one of the things about this particular team that we had that I think was so special is the maturity for such a young group. I mean, just tremendous maturity.

A lot of people talk about the adversities that we face in life and how important that is to growth and how important that is to resiliency and how that kind of is an indicator that things don't always go the way you want, but sometimes we get to pro sports and we act like losing or having a hard time getting the outcomes you want is in some way

damaging. I think you can't put players in bubble wrap and not expose them to the tough stuff because if you can't handle some tough stuff or getting knocked down, you're not going to be a very good NBA player and you're not going last very long because the NBA is basically about dealing with failure, and it's not about just competing when the chips are stacked in your favor all the time.

I thought our players did an excellent job of understanding that and really leaning into that.

A lot of questions I got at the beginning of the season were about the fact that we didn't have some of our more tenured Thunder players and how was that going to go and were we concerned about the fact that we have a tradition and a certain standard of how we operate from a professional standpoint.

But I couldn't be more pleased with the way our players stepped up during the year irrespective of their age and their experience level, just the combination of guys we had and the maturity they showed was exemplary, and I'm really proud of that.

I'm really excited about the off-season and what we have in front of us. I think we've built a lot of momentum. Obviously we have a clear direction and plan based on the possible paths that are available to us to reach the goals that we have, and our goals are high. But the first thing we need to do is let our people recharge. We need to let some people go away, take a break, let some water get back in the well, physically and mentally and emotionally, and then we'll get back to work, as we always do, right on the Draft and free agency and Summer League.

That's the other thing I'm really excited about is we'll have a full season of development and guys like Theo and Poku and all of our other younger players will have the opportunity to work with our coaches individually, which they didn't have last season, and we'll have the benefits of a Summer League and hopefully a real training camp.

This will be a little bit longer off-season than the one we had last season in terms of the actual end of the Finals to the start of training camp. Last year was I think 49 days. This year I believe it's going to be around 68 days, and on average it's about 111. So it's still not a normal one, but I think our guys will make the most of it, and we just need to make sure they get recharged like the staff, as well.

We have a big conversation that we'll be able to have with Shai coming up in the off-season, as well. We're really looking forward to that, as I said earlier. His impact on the team was pretty obvious, and we think he's a very, very bright rising player in the NBA, and we couldn't be more

excited about the growth he took, both as a player but also as a leader during the year.

We have five draft picks coming up in this particular draft, and obviously we'll be a participant in the lottery, and we haven't been there in quite some time. Anytime you're in the lottery means really being able to accept the reality that you don't really control anything at all. That's one of the things that we've learned over the years here since we've been in Oklahoma City. You can't control chance. Usually chance and good or bad luck shows up in like moments or events, and over the course of time what you hope is that skill kind of represents itself over a longer time horizon.

You know, we have a lot -- we've had a lot of good luck. Sometimes we don't attribute that to luck, and sometimes we have some bad luck, and we don't attribute it to bad luck. Klay Thompson shot 5 of 25 in Game 6, and we won that game and went to The Finals. I don't know that we would say, well, we won that game because Klay Thompson went 5 for 25. At the same time we lost that game, and we think about the fact that we had some bad luck, and he didn't do that.

So the same thing applies to the lottery. The only thing I would say about it is we do control how we think and we do control how we react, and that's really the thing we have to focus on because over a period of time, if we stay consistent with our goals, if we stay consistent with our focus and our plan, I really believe good things will happen and we'll achieve our goal of having a sustainably excellent team in Oklahoma City again.

But we want to be honest with our fans, and we have been for a very long time, about the path ahead. With no apologies, no excuses, we have our own history, we're our own best example of what can take place in Oklahoma City. But we also need to be realistic about the fact that it's probably not going to happen overnight. We accept that.

What we can't do is act irrationally, emotionally or fall into convenient storylines that are really based in the bias of what we'd like to see happen. We have to be pragmatic, we have to be adaptable, and we're going to do just that.

I think the people from Oklahoma actually are our biggest inspiration for our methodology. Sacrifice, discipline, conviction -- these are all things that our city has built itself on. We have grown over the years as a result of being willing to sacrifice for the greater good over the course of time, and to be honest with you, I think the team is here in Oklahoma City as a result of the commitment that was made during MAPS, and that's very, very much true today.

So that's the standard that we're holding ourselves to, and



we're extremely excited about it. Obviously we have to work very, very hard, but we have to be equally as smart.

As I said earlier, we can't be reactionary or emotional about it, we just have to keep chipping away every single day, knowing that over time we'll achieve our goals if we have the poise, the patience and the willingness to adjust to the setbacks that we'll inevitably encounter.

As they say, shortcuts cut long runs short, and we're going to do everything in our power not to allow that to happen.

When we do get back to the postseason, we want it to be an arrival and not an appearance, arrival meaning that we can return, we can be there, we can take some chance or bad fortune and not have it sink us completely. We've seen the benefit of that during our earlier years. We don't want to be in a position where we get there but we have no way to get back. That's the focus and the precision with which we're working.

We understand the ecosystem of the NBA, I think, very, very well. We understand how that works. We understand what we have to work with, and I feel extremely confident and optimistic about the future that we have here. We just have to continue to stick with it and understand that our city has given us our own best example, and we have to continue to subscribe to all those values.

With that, I'll just open it up to any questions, and I'm looking forward to connecting with you guys.

**Q. I just was curious, you wrote in the op-ed in 2019 that you wanted to deliver extraordinary success to the city. I'm just curious, how do you measure that today? And maybe even in the future, like what does that measuring stick look like for you?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think relative to the letter, I appreciate you talking about it because it means that people or at least you remember it.

I think there's some context to the story there that's important. Number one, I was writing that letter -- I'm not much of a writer, but I was writing that letter intermittently between calls with the Rockets and calls with Russell. As we were getting closer and closer to the point where I was like, okay, this is going to get into an acceptable area where we'll be able to get this done for Russell.

So kind of intermittently I was writing and really, really trying to make sure that I used that moment in time to be reflective about the things that had taken place over the previous years and also so many of the things I just mentioned about the history of the city and MAPS, and to

be very transparent and open and unapologetic about our goals.

As you asked about there, you know, sustainably great, being in a position to be an elite team over the course of time is not an easy thing to do. If that is your goal, then that should drive your strategy.

If we had tied our -- if it wasn't so much driven by a goal as driven by a period of time, then you don't really have any control about your goal. I think where we are right now, well, I look back on it, the last -- when I wrote that note, that was the last time we played 82 games was the end of that series in Portland. We played an 82-game season. We've played more games without fans and in a bubble than we have with fans during that period of time.

It's been a remarkable period of time to be in the NBA, but we're on the very front edges of trying to do something aspirational and great.

I think that we're willing to take the path that's hardest, but it's also the only path that's really available, if you really think about it deeply, to meeting the kind of goals that we have, and what we don't want to do is lower those goals. You know, if we lower the goals, we can change the path, but they're alloyed together.

We're really committed to putting a team on the court over time that will make people excited, proud, have incredible memories, enjoy, but I also think the path to get there is equally as exciting because you're seeing the growth of younger players, you're seeing the growth of a style of play, and you're seeing a commitment to something that I think is admirable in today's society that is generally conditioned to eat the first marshmallow and not being willing or having the discipline to wait for two.

**Q. Two of your rookies this season, Alexsej and Pokusevski, very limited playing time coming into this season due to the pandemic. If you had expectations on them, did they meet your expectations or surpass them?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I assume you're talking about Theo and Alexsej, right?

**Q. Yes.**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so coming into this season with no training camp really, no Summer League, no individual time, not knowing anybody and having some language barriers, we really were just letting it kind of unfold and see kind of where those guys were to build a baseline of observation on them.

The first thing we want to start with with any of our younger players is professional habits and understanding all the things that go into being a Thunder basketball player, and I think those guys really grew in that area. Theo specifically, that guy led us in minutes as a 19-year-old player. He has a real serious makeup. He really has just a natural professionalism to him. I think because he's played professionally for so long, and his personality is -- I think really even. That's probably an understatement.

Poku is a little bit different, and he's the youngest player in the NBA. Everybody knew that coming in. We needed to figure out where he was.

I do think the big change in his year was after he came back from the bubble. Now, as I said earlier, the G-League season is usually two-thirds longer than it was this year, so we didn't have that as a tool for us. We are huge believers in the G-League.

But I think that time in the bubble was really important for Poku, and it was a hard decision because he was playing in the rotation, we were playing pretty well, but we were -- again, we're prioritizing what is in the best interest of the long term so we can meet the goals that we have set forth for ourselves over time, and I think getting him to the bubble and being able to play with the ball a little bit more, get more comfortable, he was able to play a ton of games without the travel, play with different people. He was just put in a totally new environment. I thought we saw the benefits of that coming back.

I do think for both of these guys, these are really big summers. We've seen this over the course of time. Players improve, and then they hit road blocks. They hit regression. It's all part of development. It doesn't go as smoothly -- I think Bazley is a good example of that. I love the way Bazley finished the season. I thought he took a huge jump. But there were parts of the season where he was plateaued a little bit. Just so much credit to that guy to embrace the plateau, to fight through that, to recognize there's another jump coming if he continued to stick to those habits and stick to the mentality that we've worked with him on, and he got a big boost.

I thought actually the biggest boost that Bazley got was during the rehab from his shoulder. He got tremendous, consistent work both physically and skill-wise, and that's work that he wasn't able to get in the off-season. He actually got like almost like a mini off-season during the injury, and I think that's one of the reasons he finished the season so strong.

The same will be true with Theo and Poku. Development

is a process and not an event. As I said earlier, you can't put people in bubble wrap and say, we don't want you to experience losing or tough times or to get your ass kicked, like that is part of development. The NBA is a really, really tough league, and the history of the great players in the league is that they've bounced back from failure and they've bounced back from setbacks and sometimes bounced back from injury, and that's how you know they're the best players.

**Q. Kind of piggy-backing a little bit off that question, you talked about how valuable that G-League bubble was for Poku, and clearly it was valuable for Ty and Moses, as well. It was just such a short amount of time. What were your observations about that bubble that made it so valuable and effective in a shortened amount of time?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, look, opportunity is king in terms of guys improving and getting better, because as I said before, that's where you get exposed to shortcomings and failure, you get to figure out where you're at.

I think for all those guys, they were down there for different reasons. Ty was kind of rehabbing from the ankle injury he had in I think it was the first practice we had all season. Moses we were just trying to get some minutes for and experience. Poku was down there refining some things and working on some specific things, and Josh Hall was down there, but he was injured, so he really never got the benefit of the bubble.

I think the fact that it was so basketball centric, there was no travel -- I say this because the other bubble -- I was talking to Jamal Crawford, who's like maybe the hooper of all hoopers -- he's probably playing pickup somewhere right now -- but Jamal was saying about the previous bubble, the NBA bubble, that it's like basketball camp for adults. It's all about hoops, it's all about improvement. You're surrounded by other people that are there for the same reasons and love the game, and there's a great atmosphere.

I give the NBA and the G-League, Shareef Abdur-Rahim, a ton of credit because it would have been easy to just kind of scrap the G-League season, but you cannot do that. As I said before, the NBA is an ecosystem, right? It's an ecosystem. There's all these different parts to the ecosystem.

G-League players are a huge part of that. Those guys make up the next generation of -- I'm not talking about the signed players, but the next generation of players that will populate the NBA, and then you just can't skip a development cycle in the NBA, either. That can have

disastrous effects on the future of the game. You just can't stall the game out like that.

I give them a ton of credit for recognizing the importance of playing that season even though it was abbreviated, but it was a great experience for our guys.

**Q. You guys have a couple of cracks at a top-5 pick. I wanted to get your thoughts on how the final lottery odds shook out, and also almost everyone is calling this a five-player draft, at least the top five heavy in talent. Do you see it in the same way?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, let me take your first question. The lottery odds, as we know, are a lot more evenly distributed now. The odds never -- the outcomes never -- I might be wrong, someone will crush me for saying this, but I think it's never gone one, two, three, four in order. That's why it's a lottery.

I said earlier, like we got a -- everyone has got to understand and accept the fact that chance and luck play a massive -- an outsized amount of influence on not every team in the NBA, but a large majority of them, and we can see that when you look at the Playoffs.

You don't know how it's going to go. The only thing you can do is react accordingly, continue to follow your steps and your principles, not overreact either way. But the number one thing is accepting the fact that you have no control over it, and it does have an outsized impact on the timeline of your team.

But for a lot of teams, unfortunately, like if we're talking about how to build a great team, you have to really analyze the available paths that will put you close enough to the resources you need to have one of those teams. You can just invert the entire equation, and it's pretty clear.

But it's still the rule of luck. So the only thing we can control is how we think about that, how we respond to that, and I'm extraordinarily confident that irrespective of how that evening goes, we'll play the ball from there, and we'll keep, as I said, being extremely methodical and diligent about how we build the team. We're not interested in lowering our aspirations. We've been here for 13 years now. We've averaged about 50 wins a season, and it takes time to retool that coming off the type of performances that we've had over the course of time.

The lottery will play a role in that, but it won't be the only role, and a big part of it is going to be how you respond to whatever the outcomes are.

With respect to the Draft itself, just like the lottery rarely

goes one, two, three, four, five in order, the Draft is littered with good players, and they very rarely go one, two, three, four, five in order. I think it's clear that for the most part the wisdom of crowds has it so that the odds are better toward the top of the Draft, for obvious reasons, and the odds get significantly declined as you move back through the Draft. But there's always players.

The other aspect of that is drafting players is one aspect of it. Keeping them healthy, developing them, figuring them out personally as well as from a skill standpoint and putting them in a position to thrive and excel over time is a whole other equation that I think sometimes gets overlooked.

But I think it's like most other drafts. Like clearly the high-end talent, the players that we see on the commercials, they're generally drafted toward the top. But there's good players throughout, and I think the NBA is full of really good players that weren't necessarily drafted at the top of the Draft.

**Q. Off the top you mentioned the prevalence of the three-point shot, and I just wanted to get your thoughts on the trends and play style in the NBA right now and the way the Thunder played this year and wants to play moving forward.**

SAM PRESTI: I think we're determining that a little bit. I think one of the great things about where we are as a team is we're not fixed in anything we're doing or thinking. I think we can be very adaptable. I think we can be very opportunistic, and we're very flexible in not just our team building mechanisms but also our thinking.

This season was really important for us to kind of get a baseline of where we were with our individual players. I think one thing that helps us from a style of play standpoint is Shai and Lu and some of our other guys, they are pretty adaptable to how they play, and we saw that with Shai, actually, specifically it played out.

Last season, we obviously came into the season, we didn't know -- it was just like this season. We're trying to let the team unfold itself, and it did in a very positive way, and we were healthy throughout the season. Shai played on the ball about 5 or 6 percent of the time.

Fast forward to this season, it was very, very important for us to get some questions answered about him and give him an opportunity with the ball, and he played on the ball 100 percent of the ball. It was a pretty drastic change. So he's shown that he can be effective in a lot of different ways, but that's just the style of player that he is.

I think Lu is similar. You can kind of put Lu Dort anywhere

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

because of what he physically brings to the game. So that's helpful.

In respect to the style of play in the NBA, that's something -- to give you context on this, this is kind of a microcosm of the season as a whole -- we have these general manager meetings, and I don't know how often, I would say once a month maybe. When we were really in the thick of things, twice, maybe three times a month from a pandemic standpoint. Every single one of those meetings this season was all about health and safety protocols, changes to those, adjustments on the fly. It was absolute collaboration, teamwork from the league and team standpoint about how do we navigate this in a very unprecedented situation.

The one time we did talk about the game itself was toward the very end. I think it was our last meeting as a matter of fact. You know, one of the things that's been talked about is like the style of play that -- obviously it's a huge three-point shooting barrage on a night-to-night basis.

I think it's hard to evaluate this season in any respect because you'd have to evaluate it to the last season we played in a pandemic, and we don't have a great control group for that.

I think the three-point shooting, it can lead you to think certain things, and this year -- I mean, I think that like 30 percent of the games or something like that were decided by 10 points or more, and 20 percent were decided by 20 points or more. I might have those flipped. But the amount of big scores and big gaps in deficits -- I also think there was a significant amount of comebacks that were probably unprecedented, but just the margin of victory this year -- one, it's the style of play; two, there's certainly a fatigue issue from the schedule in the second half for sure; and then on an night-to-night basis, the team is totally different because of the players in and out, either for injury or health and safety protocols, so there's a lot of change.

So you're going to get some big swings in the scores. The style of play is obviously the number one driver because the threes compound. Like a Benjamin Graham book would tell you, it's pretty powerful once you get into the third or fourth one if they go unanswered.

I think that we have to be careful about jumping to too many conclusions about that, but the thing that I do feel is that we can adjust and adapt. Like we've always been of the mindset that we have to be who we are. We have to play to our strengths. It doesn't make sense to rail against change because I think change is healthy. I think change is good. But you don't want to just mimic things because I think that's how you end up in the middle.

So you have to be thoughtful about where you take things and not just follow the pack, but I don't see it changing anytime soon. If you're going to change it, the way style of play has changed in the past has been when the rules change. So if the officiating changes -- the last time we got this huge boom in scoring was when we changed all the hand-checking rules, and all of a sudden overnight certain players became dramatically more valuable and other players became dramatically less valuable, just with the rule change.

So if there are some adjustments to the officiating -- and I think the officiating is great, so I don't want that to come across that way -- but the way to adjust the style of play and bring it back a little bit to a more balanced offensive-defensive game would be the rules. The rules dictate the style of play, and the players then do everything they can within the rules to stretch the game, and then you have to adjust and adapt because the players are so good.

I'm not a grumpy old man on my porch saying that all the threes are bad. I just think it has to be thought about, like what is our goal, what's the product we want ultimately, do we want everybody playing the same way, do we want more diversity in the way we play, what is the role of the different positions that we want to have, how tied are we to tradition. I need you to start with a series of questions about where you want to end up versus just reacting to the statistics themselves.

I think the data helps, but it should drive your strategy towards what your ultimate goal should be.

**Q. Do you feel like COVID made the evaluation of players more difficult, both the players you're scouting and the young guys on the draft?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think it's a great question. I think that's one of the things that we talked about early in the year.

I think you can just try to get through the season or you can try to get better during the season and not use the limitations as excuses for why you couldn't get something done or not.

We were very limited in our opportunity to look at our players because there was no practice, no G-League, and no real individual time. We would have so much more, kind of, opportunity to evaluate.

When Shai got injured, that was our opportunity -- we saw the season change, so like if you're being a rational person and you don't already have in your mind the story you want



to tell yourself, then you would look and say, well, this is the opportunity, in a season that's already going to be pretty tough from an evaluation standpoint, to see our younger players and put them in positions that are stressful and challenging and difficult and see who reacts well and who doesn't react well and then create plans in the off-season to help improve them incrementally from that.

I do think it was challenging, but you had to be resourceful is my answer to that. Relative to the draft, it's the same thing.

I was able to get out a fair amount. Was it the way that I preferred to do things or I'm used to? No. But if you came into the season expecting -- not expecting imperfection, then shame on you. Of course we were going to be having to do things differently, and in a lot of ways I think it teaches us -- one, it gives us gratitude for how fortunate we are to be able to do certain things and hopefully one day get back to doing them the way that we've done them, but also gratitude that you're thinking and learning new things, which I think is like the key to life.

I learned new things about evaluating guys via film, different ways we could do it, the amount of coverage we could get. I think our scouting meetings have been great, although they're obviously not in person but they're virtual like this setting. But I do feel that our guys have watched more quantity relative to some of the players that maybe would be harder for us because when you're playing planes, trains and automobiles, there's not as much evaluation time for a traditional scout.

Again, the other thing I'd say is I'm a big believer in just equity and equality of opportunity in terms of the competition, and everybody was dealing with the same things. It's not like certain teams were given -- had inherent advantages. It was everybody together dealing with the same circumstances and the same situation, and I'll take that with our group any day of the week.

**Q. You mentioned the change of lottery odds, and obviously -- not obviously, but by all accounts, back in 2014 when it first got presented, you were on the front lines of fighting against it happening, but of course there was a process, what happened in Philadelphia. By 2017 it was almost a unanimous vote, but you flash forward to this year and you have you guys making an announcement about sitting Al Horford, John Wallace sitting with Houston, the Magic trade, three veteran players, Detroit has a buyout with Blake Griffin. Clearly the lottery odds has not dissuaded a pretty large portion of smaller market teams from playing this lottery game that you've talked about being so perilous, but it's obviously still a pretty attractive**

**option for teams in your situation to get back to the postseason like you've talked about. Do you think that there will be more look by the league to eventually retool the lottery again, or do you think that based off what's happened this is kind of still going to be the method moving forward?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, there's a lot to unpack there. I think it's a great question, and I appreciate it. So the first thing I would just say, just to clarify, back at that period of time, much has been made about our vote on that. I think you'll go back and look at the voting of our organization over the course of time, like we vote on principle, we vote on what we believe is in the best interest of the larger group. It's not necessarily -- at the time we had no vested interest in it. We were a 60-win, 55-win team, so we were not voting for our own best interest at that time. That's one of the great things about working for Clay is it's about what's the right thing for the whole group. At the same time we have to act in our own best interest because we're one of 30, everybody else is competing, as well, but at that point in time it wasn't us so much as conversations that take place all the time and everybody really getting a handle on like what are the unintended consequences of these types of decisions, because as I said before, this is an ecosystem. Everything is interrelated. If you're going to have five or six teams that come into the season with the best odds to win, they're taking those odds away from five or six other teams.

On average, there's -- I think over the course of time an average of four or five teams a year that are going to win 25 games or less. All of those teams are there for different reasons. And then there's natural cycles that teams go through relative to rebuilding. It's like any other business. There's some teams that prioritize the present at the expense of the future, and there's other teams that prioritize the future at the expense of the present.

Everybody has a different path, kind of as you said.

The one thing I would disagree with a little bit is, I can't remember the word you used, but something about like being happy about that or that's the path that -- I can't remember the word you used, but it was something positive. I don't necessarily think that committing to longer term rebuilding processes because that's the best available path to you is necessarily the thing that you are anxious and excited to do. I think everybody would like to throw their doors open and let two prime free agents walk through the door and vault you to 50-plus wins for the next five or six years, but that's not the way it works.

I think rather than railing against the ecosystem itself, I think you have to work within it and figure out ways for your

particular team to achieve your goals, and your goals might be different than the other 29.

That to me is the independence of the league. I don't think that this season in and of itself is a great example, as I said earlier, about the shooting and the scorers. I think this particular season is a bit of a one-and-one. The one consistent is that there are traditionally -- again, I think it's more mathematical than anything, four or five teams that are always going to be in a cycle and four or five teams that are on the opposite end of that cycle. You're not really going to change that just because of it's a zero-sum game with the amount of wins that are available, and if someone is going to be predators just like in any ecosystem, someone is going to be prey. That's just the way that it works in sports and in a system like the NBA.

I don't think you can look at this year and say, oh, well, this is like this year. I don't think you can say that a particular trend is destiny because we're playing in a pandemic and all these other factors play a role in that. So I would be careful about saying, okay, this is the way it's going to be or this is the way it has to be. I think if you peel back the layers in every situation, every one of these teams in the league, all 30, have different dynamics that they're managing through and working through because of the pandemic.

Health and safety to me is the absolute number one focus for our organization. As I said before, like we are very cognizant of the fact that this is a unique year, and we need to adjust and manage for that, given the fact that it's -- it was an aggressive year from a schedule standpoint. But it had to be done, and everybody was subject to it. But you don't want to see anything really derail your future as a result of having to play through some of these things.

I also think we're going to be subject to another really short off-season this year, this summer, and so we're going to see some residue of that lead into next year, as well, and I think you're going to have to be really careful coming out of this summer especially with the Olympics and the role that they play.

I just would be careful about making big statements or decisions on a season that was like no other.

**Q. Kind of piggy-backing off what you were just asked, there's been some national conversation as there often is about tanking, and I'm sure you might choose to use a different word other than tanking, but how do you kind of respond to that criticism of that strategy that has kind of come up recently?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I have to know what the criticism is

and then I'd probably ask like what the person's incentives are for taking that position. And that would give me a much better understanding of how to respond to it.

I think, again, rebuilding a team, I can't speak for everybody, but after 12 or 13 -- I should say 12 years of exhaustive efforts to try to maximize and make a run last as possible, if we look at history, there's generally a period of time and sometimes a significant period of time where you have to kind of reposition your team, replenish your team and rebuild your team. We've kind of been very transparent -- I don't think there's anything novel about it other than the transparency that based on the paths available to us, player development is really kind of king for us and giving guys opportunities to grow and develop is for us the most reliable path to achieving our goals.

Obviously the draft plays a huge role in that. We haven't drafted towards the top of the draft. That could potentially happen this season. And you know, that's kind of the -- like I said before, that's the ecosystem of the NBA. You could go through years and years and years; I don't think you're going to find a year where everybody goes 41-41.

**Q. Earlier you talked about development that you saw from Poku and Theo and Baz, but I just wanted to see if there were any other thoughts you had about strides forward that stood out to you from some of the players this season and anybody that really jumped to you?**

SAM PRESTI: You know, I just go back to kind of -- I wouldn't say it's one person. I just think the maturity of the group was really impressive to me, and Mark and his coaching staff just did a remarkable job this year. I just was really impressed with the job they did.

I think one of the things that they did excellent was they really talked with the guys about the vision and values of the organization and really tied that into the approach on the court, which is a very powerful thing and one of the things that I just was really, really excited and makes me very optimistic about our future is really Mark is a guy that's worked here for a while. He's been a big contributor to our environment. He really believes in the way we operate and how and why we do things that we stand for more than what we do, and that it's bigger than basketball in a lot of ways and that we're seeking progress all the time in every area, and that there's a tradition here, and a lot of people have sacrificed over the course of time from a player standpoint that have set incredible standards.

We're trying to strive to continue to maintain them and evolve them in a more modern way as time goes on, as well. In talking about that -- the same things we're talking about in the hallways he's talking about with our guys, and

I think that's a really cool thing to be a part of.

That I think did stem or did seed a lot of the maturity that we saw from the guys and the growth we saw in terms of their perspective on what it is that was taking place. We weren't getting outcomes that we were seeking, but individually everyone was getting better, the group got closer as the year went along, and we had a lot of different guys step up, come in, come out. We added a guy -- I'll give you a great example.

Our exit interview with Gaby Deck, as you guys know, he's not a very strong English speaker right now, although he's much better than my Spanish. We just kind of asked him about his acclimation to the organization and the team and who helped him. And he was just amazing about the guys specifically who helped his transition and everyone that played a different role, whether it was Ty Jerome or Roby or Kenrich Williams making sure he understood an out-of-bounds play or Moses Brown making sure he understood where the food was after a game on the road. Just the way the guys took care of each other and the camaraderie of the group, I just am really impressed with it.

They were obviously -- everyone was incentivized by the opportunity to compete and establish themselves in the NBA, and I think that we're going to look up in time and we're not going to be able to keep everybody, but I do think that there's going to be a few guys, I don't know who they are yet, but are going to play roles on good teams in the future as a result of the opportunity they had this season, and the league is littered with guys that got opportunities from a developmental team or developmental season that have gone on to be very lucrative contracts and play roles on big teams.

Not everybody starts out on a 50-win team, and if they did, they'd never get to play. I think those guys are there. That's one of the things I'm most excited about. I want to see who of this group really goes on to carve out a strong future in the NBA. We're here, but as you know, we're on the front edges of a real journey, and we're not going to be able to just hug everybody. There's 17 spots with the two-ways. We have a lot of draft picks coming up. We're going to look at a lot of different guys over the course of time. But I love the fact that these guys are getting opportunity here, and hopefully there will be more guys that we can put on that lineage of -- take the Hall-of-Fame guys away, but the Jerami Grants and the Sabonises and the Schrodgers and the Nerlens Noels and the Kanters and the Steven Adams, the guys that have really made a name for themselves through a development path here and are now doing great things other places.

I'd love to add to that list, and I'm pretty sure there's going

to be a few guys from this team that's going to be able to make those jumps in the future.

**Q. My question is about Gaby Deck. I'm curious if you can walk us through why you guys decided to structure the contract the way you did with the four years, all the non-guarantees and why you guys felt it was worth it to take a look at this 26-year-old rookie for what amounted to 10 days to a month.**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, well, I mean, it kind of answers both questions, actually. We weren't going to have very much time to look at him as a result of the immigration process that we kind of were forecasting. There was part of us that was concerned we wouldn't have him for any games because now is not the easiest time to get visas, and we were very fortunate because he had been to the States before I think as a teenager.

But we've liked Gaby for a while. We've watched him quite a bit. The Argentinian players, they bring something special to the game and to teams, and I've been a huge beneficiary of being around those types of players when I was in San Antonio, whether it was Oberto or Scola, obviously Ginobili, but guys like Pepe Sanchez, Montecchia, Prigioni, you can go down the line, Kammerichs. These guys have a spirit -- Wolkowysky. These guys have a spirit to the way they play. They have a commitment to team above all else. They have an inherent toughness and competitiveness that is just -- it's just a great system of player development that they have there.

Deck has been a guy that's fallen into our kind of conversations over the course of time. The opportunity came up for us to be able to acquire him. I thought it was a tremendously courageous decision that he made because he is so driven to test himself in the NBA. I was really impressed with that.

I think that -- I thought he did quite well in the 10 games that he played for us.

Again, very little -- with no practice. I don't know if he had a practice, quite frankly. But these are the conditions everybody is playing with. Very limited English, although he's working on it and made big strides while he was here. And the reality is he's about -- through this wall 20 yards from me is working out right now.

I'm a fan. I think he's a winning player, and I think he brings something special to a team.

**Q. You touched on in your opening statement with Shai and his injury and the season changing course**



... when all is said, we're done.®

**was the plan to shut down Al and Mike, was that going to happen regardless, or did that happen because of Shai's injury? And also, the people that wanted to know who is going to represent you guys at the lottery.**

SAM PRESTI: Well, let me answer the last part first. We don't know the answer to that yet. We haven't put any thought into that. We have plenty of time for that.

With respect to your earlier question, I think as I said earlier, we came into the season like we did last season. Last season everybody made predictions about our team and how good we were going to be or how bad we were going to be and what we're trying to do or not trying to do. We played the season. The season unfolded, and we had a really special year, I think one of the more fun years that we've had in Oklahoma City in a long time.

People really enjoyed that.

We came into the season, this season, with the exact same mentality. Let's see where we are, let's see what we have, let's let the season unfold itself, and at the same kind of point in time of kind of the midsection of the season or maybe a little bit further in, 28 games left, we got that news on Shai.

That, again, like I said earlier, that's where you have to be like a pragmatic, rational person, and you have to think about, okay, we just lost our best player, he's the engine for all of our efficiency. We are a team that is very reliant on player development. We're in a year where we're in the middle of a pandemic, and we don't have a lot of player development opportunities. Health and safety is very critical and important to us. We want to make sure that we're keeping everybody safe. Those conversations were mutual, as Al said. They were expedited for sure as a result of the injury to Shai because we knew how big a change that was going to be, and then Mike similar, and those were the decisions we made relative to how we wanted to maximize the latter part of the season relative to kind of how we in Oklahoma City have to build our team.

**Q. I just wanted to follow up on multiple parts of that. The situation with Al, you guys have both described it as mutual. Just moving forward, do you expect to find a trade for him this summer? What are those conversations going to be like?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think one thing that's been established is just our communication and relationship with Al has been, like, excellent since the day he got here. I can't say enough positive things about him. He's a total pro. He is a great guy. He's easy to talk to. He's mature, and he has a good perspective on kind of where he is in

his career. And also understands where we are in our journey, as well.

But like any conversation that we have with players, we keep those things internal for good reason, and we'll sit down and we'll talk about what the path forward might be, but I don't think those are things that we'll be like broadcasting. But we are certainly going to sit down and figure out kind of where we are and what the next steps will be.

**Q. Just speaking of conversations, you mentioned having one with Shai this summer as far as presumably extension talks. What jump did you -- I know it was only 35 games that he played, but what did he prove to you this year as a third-year player?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think again, it's one of those things where you look back and you say coming into the year, where were we. I think we didn't know, because we had never seen him -- this is a great example of development and opportunity. Similar to the last 28 games where you got to look at a larger swath of players, this season coming in we created a pathway to have him really lead the team and have the ball in his hands full time. I don't believe any of us -- I'm not just talking about the team members, but you guys in the media could have predicted or new how he would do because he was never given that opportunity.

Just because he did extraordinarily well doesn't mean that we knew that was going to be the case then. But he did exceptional with that responsibility.

I thought that he really had a huge impact on our shot distribution if you look at it. He made quantum jumps in his assist rate. I think he may have led the league in drives. He improved his three-point shooting. All of those things are tangible and obvious.

The other thing I think that he did was I think he realized that he had the opportunity to really empower his teammates. I thought he helped a lot of our guys improve and put them in position to be successful, and that got much tougher when he wasn't on the court, which is an indicator that he's a good player. That's what you want.

At the same time, when he's not on the floor, we look at a guy like Lu Dort, and his role -- I don't know that anybody's role changed more from one year to the next than Lu Dort. He was always guarding the best player, but then he went from guarding the best player to having the best player guard him. And so just the amount of load and the change in the mentality coming into the game for him, I am not sure it could be more drastic in a year's time.

Again, opportunity and development, not all of it smooth, not all of it perfect, a lot of learning and still a lot of things to improve on, but getting a chance to see that up close and personal I think is important.

But Shai's emotional intelligence is at a high very level, and he understands team dynamics. I think he understands the confidence he can create in other people and the result that that can bring to a team. He's an optimistic guy by nature, which is a tremendous trait in today's world in society. Forget basketball. He comes to work every day with a smile on his face. He's ready to work. But he's a great competitor.

There's a lot of things there that I think bode well for him, but we didn't have those answers.

The benefit -- I mean, he's still growing in a lot of ways, and I think his best basketball is clearly in front of him, but I wouldn't want us to pretend that we would have been able to -- I'd rather be like prepared than predicting things. So I'd rather prepare to give him the opportunity than just assume artificially, like okay, this is going to happen. I think that's -- I don't think that's a very intelligent way to go about building anything.

**Q. Mark described it as a significant tear. Are there any specific injury updates or the progress he's made that you can share with Shai and how that's going? And also just is surgery an option or is that not an option?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, I think that's the whole point is that we don't want it to be an option, so you want to remove that. We want to remove that off the table. You don't want to be in a position where you're doing anything that's going to lead to that. Obviously that's possible with that type of an injury, but I think we've averted that possibility unless he were to come back and go backward. But he's not on that track right now.

But as he said, he knows his body better than anybody, and I think he may have told you guys that -- I think he said it isn't 100 percent yet, which I think is probably realistic, but this is an injury that takes time to come back from. With a guy of that magnitude, certainly we want to make sure that he's -- or any player, we want to make sure they feel good and they're healthy before they're put back on the floor for sure.

**Q. You kind of hit on -- talking about Lu Dort, I was going to ask you about him. When you signed him as a two-way player, last year he was a defender, this year he became more of a scorer and defender, did you see that happening? And two, where does his game go**

**next year and beyond?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, obviously I didn't see that. I can't emphasize for you enough, we don't know any of this. We're trying to make educated guesses. We're trying to shift the odds.

It's just really, really hard to get good players in the NBA. I think the lesson of the Lu Dort situation is you need to try. Like you -- we're not a team that, like I said before, we're not throwing the doors open, and that's not the way it works in the majority of cities. But we're a draft-and-develop organization, and we own that. We're happy with that. That's the ecosystem, we work within the rules, and we work to increase our odds of meeting our goals, and part of that is we've got to give some guys some opportunity.

We didn't expect Lu to take on this trajectory. The one thing I always come back to when I talk about Lu, and I have such respect for him as a competitor and a person, is the day after the draft where he wasn't drafted, right, that shows how smart all of us are, right? There's tons of those situations. Like I said before, everybody is guessing at the end of the day.

But he came here, and I remember having breakfast with him. It was an early morning, he flew in overnight -- it may have been the day after. We gave him a day and then he came in. I had breakfast with him, and we were just talking about how the draft itself is like -- it's not the end of anything, it's actually the beginning.

After draft night you're going to line up every player in that class, drafted and undrafted, and they're all starting from the same space. The thing that generally I think separates good from great is not necessarily skill and it's not necessarily talent, but it's focus, discipline and resilience.

We talked about that and the fact that he couldn't be in a better place because the things that he's about align with what it is that we're about, that he has the mental makeup to run a very long race in comparison to the other people in the draft class, and that he shouldn't be looking to the left, to the right or behind him, just run your own race and look up in 10 years, and those qualities are going to carry you as far as you should be carried.

I just think he's -- my encouragement to Lu now is generally don't look behind you, but don't look to either side. Just keep running your race. Finding ways to get better, improve. We're not looking for perfection, we're looking for progress. That looks different for everybody. You're in a fabulous place where we really appreciate what you bring to the table, and we're going to give you some

opportunity to figure out -- to stretch your game a little bit.

His competitiveness and his spirit and his toughness are kind of the bedrocks of the things that a lot of other players we've had over the years who really have set the standards here have helped put in place. Nick Collison loves Lu Dort.

These are great things that he possesses. So where does his game go? I wouldn't want to box him in, but I don't think we should be -- I think we need to hit singles there and not just let our imaginations run wild. He has a ton of work to do, but he's got to stay the competitor, which he will, the competitor that he is, because that's what amplifies his talent, and that's what I think gives him a chance to be much different and maintain that hunger and persistence.

**Q. With your draft situation, which we don't know if you're going to get to go one, five, nine, 17, no telling, but wherever you land, are you considering trying to move up, using all your future draft assets that are so -- you have so many of them you couldn't possibly use them all to actually draft those guys. Is that part of a potential strategy for this year, which appears to be a really deep draft at the top?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so I think -- first, I think it comes down to just overall our philosophy on kind of the draft in general, which is we always try to move up. Unless we're one, but if we're 60, we want to be 59. If we're 59, we want to be 58. I think we saw that last year. We moved up from the mid-20s to get to 17. We moved up from the 50s to get to late 30s to get Vit. The year before that we moved back to get Bazley. We moved back a couple spots and picked up a second to get Bazley. And then we used that second, I think, to get up to get Vit this year if I'm not mistaken.

You know, we're always looking to move and find ways, but I wouldn't say we're doing that blindly. Like we have to always assess what's the value proposition, like what is it that we are willing to do and where are we willing to get to, but it also has to be inverted because we're also as open to moving back based on the value that we see in the transaction.

The other thing that we're open to do, and we haven't done it -- maybe we have. I can't remember. It's all running together. It's moving out completely, because you never know what's on the other end of that phone, like what someone else -- what their circumstances are, what their incentives are, what they're willing to do. So like there are circumstances or scenarios where I'm sure we would just clean our hands and move out completely depending on where we were.

So I think it's a very consistent approach. I don't think that

will change.

Clearly the additional draft assets are certainly valuable for a lot of reasons. One, you had mentioned trading them. Obviously you can draft players with them. I think one thing we saw this trade season is the value of second-round picks to add specific players, depending on where your team is. Obviously we want to be in a position where making small adaptations and adjustments really can move the needle significantly, but second-round picks are a huge currency to be able to add kind of small boosts, veteran boosts and thing like that.

The benefit that we have is that we have a lot of those assets pushed down the line quite far, which what that does is it gives us more time to determine how to utilize them, where our team is, because the team is going to kind of tell you kind of where you are ultimately.

I think a lot of mistakes get made when you artificially -- how do I say this? When you artificially try to accelerate something that needs to build momentum or growth organically, and so we're not -- I think the team has to lead you to that, but if you artificially try to do that, I think now what you're doing is you are really limiting the upside of your goals or your potential outcomes because you're basically letting time or impatience or lack of poise kind of drive your decision making rather than your goals kind of drive those.

I think the team organically will lead us to a certain point, just like it did in 2009 when we made the Jeff Green trade. We had consistently -- we had a nice team. We had grown. We were improving. We were running into -- we were getting real-time information that we were having a hard time against really big, physical front lines like the Randolph Gasols, the Nenes and Kenyon Martins, Gasol and Bynum. Obviously it's kind of crazy to say it, but the whole league was different at that time.

We were just getting manhandled by those teams. So we had information -- if we had tried to predict or accelerate it artificially, like, hey, we think this is going to be the problem so let's use some future assets for that, I think you really run the risk of missing opportunities. That's why I said before I'd rather be prepared than predictive, and you want to basically be like, okay, we have enough to make choices, once we know kind of where we need to move in what direction.

I think that's a great position that we're in is that we can be adaptive. We can be creative and we can be opportunistic. We're not fixed into one track or another.

**Q. When we talked to Mike Muscala for his exit**



**interview he got emotional when talking about how he didn't want to be traded or bought out, wanted to finish the season with the Thunder. What were those conversations like with him and just the presence that he had, and also as he's set to become a free agent again, just the possibility of him perhaps being back?**

SAM PRESTI: Sure. Well first, I saw his comments. I am tremendously grateful and very moved by the way he feels about the team and the organization. He's been here for a couple years. I think he really connects with the vision that we have for what we stand for and how we try to operate on a day-to-day basis. We're not trying to be all things to all people, but there are going to be people that really thrive in this environment and enjoy it, and those are also the people that really help make it what it is. So it's kind of like a virtual cycle.

I think Mike brings a lot to the table. He and I are very open, transparent line of communication with our players. We talked with him about the trade deadline coming up. He was very clear with me that he understood the need for us to give guys like Roby and Moses and down the line opportunity. He was a young player at one time, as well, and understood the value of that. Someone had to give him a shot.

You know, that type of commitment and just a real global understanding of how things work and that he can still be a factor and role in that process was big.

I love this story, as well, like Mike obviously -- he's had some ankle issues over his career and he had a bad one toward the end of the season, so he wasn't even available to play, but in the short time kind of after the deadline, he was jumping in all the workouts with Roby and really helping him, like getting prepared for games and -- he thinks Isaiah is a good player and wants to see him do well. That type of mentality, like that's what we're after here.

Mike could have gone the other way. He could have said, I would like to go have a chance to play, but I think he feels real good about the situation here. He feels like he's contributing. He has a purpose, and he connects well with it, and he was helping the other guys.

As I said before, like the maturity of the team overall, that doesn't just mean the younger players, but just in general, in a year like we had where there would be a lot of reasons to be pessimistic or point to things that weren't perfect, that wasn't happening. I give Mike a lot of credit for that.

Relative to his free agency, I can't really talk about that just because of the rules, but he's made an impact here. He's

made an impact here.

**Q. I know drafting is really hard, but what are some of the qualities you're going to be looking for with these prospects you're looking at?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, similar things to things we've talked about in the past. I think it's one thing to identify NBA players. I think it's another thing to find NBA players that can thrive in your organization.

A lot of times people talk about fit, and I think they're talking about like basketball fit, like on a roster.

I'm not so sure that that's necessarily, especially for the stage that we're in as a team, that fit is the primary driver, or it should be in any draft. But I do think fit relative to your organization, your environment, your ability to help the player reach their long-term potential, creating an environment for them to thrive, I do think you need fit there, and I don't think that's -- I think that can be different for different organizations and different teams, in a positive way. Do you know what I mean? That to me is what makes the NBA great.

The team in X location with their particular makeup or style of play or environment, they might gravitate towards X. The team somewhere else might gravitate towards Y. Like that's the beauty of sports. If everybody is trying to do the same thing, I don't think that's very exciting.

We're all operating, as I said before, in an ecosystem where we all have to find our own niche. There's certain keystone species in those ecosystems. I think we all know that. We can't avoid that. But everyone is trying to do their own thing. I think we're looking for the best fit for us and our city and our community and our organization that has the best opportunity to realize their potential with us.

We also want to have -- we've looked for high-character guys that compete, have resilience, understand what it means to be a part of a team, are willing to sacrifice for that. We're really like that's a big baseline for us. Are we perfect on those things all the time? No. But we've really worked hard on understanding what won't work and where we'll have trouble, and I don't put that on the player. But like where we have a hard time helping versus like, oh, yeah, this will be great, this will be good, I think you kind of process of elimination by inverting it.

**Q. You mentioned during Barry's question that you can't artificially grow something, but you also need to be adaptive and can't stay on one fixed track. How did the competitive play of that first half of the season when Shai was healthy change your timeline in the**

## rebuild and any feasible playoff chase?

SAM PRESTI: I don't understand the question. Can you come at me one more time with that?

**Q. When you talk about being adaptive, in the first half of the season you guys were very competitive, Shai is looking like a very, very good basketball player. Did that change your timeline on the rebuild?**

SAM PRESTI: No. I would say, again, like I said before, we came into the season kind of letting the season unfold as it did. We weren't like deterministic about one thing or the other, similar to the way we've handled previous seasons, as well.

What it did change was our possibilities for this season, significantly. That's a good example of being adaptive. Being pragmatic, being realistic, recognizing where the opportunities could be in that situation. In that case it was we've got to develop our guys. Lu gets a little more opportunity here, Ty Jerome. I don't know that we would know as much about Ty Jerome this season if we didn't become a little more adaptive or pragmatic there.

With respect to kind of -- I think when you're talking about like a timeline issue, I go back to what I was talking about with Barry, which is if you're going to attach yourself to time is the most important priority in your process, then that is okay, but then your outcomes are just a byproduct of your commitment to time. If you make your goals the most important thing in your prioritization, then the byproduct of that is how much time it might take. But that doesn't necessarily mean it takes a long time. It might take a short time. That's kind of not in your control.

But as soon as you start making time the number one priority, you're taking opportunity to reach higher-end goals off the table because you're making concessions to meet an arbitrary time period.

We are prone to resist allowing anything to dictate our outcomes other than our goals, so you have your goals, you have a path to help you reach those goals, and the byproduct is the amount of time it might take.

Flip that around. If you say, we want to do this within this much time, you can have a path that you determine based on the amount of time you have. It's generally expedited, which means that you're making concessions along the way. And then the outcomes you get -- or I guess they're more outcomes than goals, they're just a byproduct of what you can squeeze into a period of time that you are saying you want to work with. So we would kind of try to do it the other way.

We would try to say, hey, we have high aspirations, we have a plan, we're executing on that plan. We understand the system and the ecosystem and the available paths to us. We're willing to make hard choices and sacrifices to ultimately reach our goal, and what we don't want to do is be governed by time because all that means is we're that much closer to having to start again. We'd rather be methodical and careful and mapped out the best that we can, and if there's an opportunity to make that go much faster, by all means.

But we have a very healthy respect and humility about how hard it is to try to do what we did the first 10 years. We don't expect it to be easy because if it was, you'd see everybody playing consistently in the Playoffs and going deep in the Playoffs, and you don't see that.

We have to be willing to do the hard things, just like I tell my son all the time. Do the hard things. The shortcut is to do the hard things, because ultimately you're going to end up back there anyway, so why not do it the first time.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Sam, for your time. We appreciate it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports