

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Friday, September 24, 2021  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

## Sam Presti

### Press Conference

**SAM PRESTI:** I just want to welcome everybody to the conversation today albeit a little bit delayed due to Zoom. I think this time of year, I always am extremely grateful for the fact that this will be now our 14th year in Oklahoma City playing basketball in our community and in our state.

Since 2008, it's been an incredible, incredible journey, something that we've all been benefited from and extremely grateful for. So having another year is super special. Coming off of last year, I'd say of all of our 13 years to date, it was clearly the most unique. Coming off the bubble, having no off-season, playing 72 games, not having fans, playing in a pandemic. We're still playing in a pandemic but in some different circumstances.

It is certainly a unique year last year. I don't know about for everybody else, but it's like a time warp of sorts because, in getting ready to do this press conference today, I was thinking about the fact that a year ago we didn't have a coach. Chris Paul and Steven Adams were still on the Thunder, and we were about like 20 days removed from a playoff series with the Rockets where it didn't down to a last possession.

Now, to me, it seems like it was ages ago. It's amazing what life in this environment does. As we head into this season, there's so many things to be excited about. One, we'll have fans back in the building, which we're thrilled about. We've had an off-season, albeit the second shortest off-season in history, but it seems quite normal to us because last year we didn't really have one.

We have a group of one players that are hungry and are excited to play and a group of returning guys that are also really excited about getting the season started. I would still say, as I said earlier, we are playing in a pandemic. I'd expect some disruptions just based on the fact that we're not testing our players, and there's just going to be some things that we have to navigate, but we're equipped to do that at this point. We have enough experience to figure out how to operate in this environment, and I'm confident we'll be able to do that.



As far as the off-season itself, I thought it was great to have the guys around. I think for Mark, it was wonderful. Mark has continued to be just a tremendous organizational contributor. He really understanding and has a passion for the way we have to build our teams in Oklahoma City. It's really great to watch his growth.

I'm excited that he's going to be able to have practice with the team. We really couldn't practice last year because of all the protocols. So it will be a different year for him, and I'm excited to watch his continued development.

As we started the season last year, we had a more experienced team, and I think there were some real benefits to the season we had last year. We cleared some pathway for players to stretch out and try to figure out what we have, but we were kind of in the middle in that regard until we had some injuries that opened it up further.

On kind of the time warp example, a year ago we didn't really know what we had in Shai either. It was the first time he was going to play first time point guard for us, and the strides that he's made in less than a calendar year really remarkable and a credit to his mentality and intellectual maturity for such a young player.

Coming into this season, we have a significant younger team and a team that's inexperienced in comparison to a lot of teams in the NBA, which at the end of the day, I think truthfully, it's really necessary for us at this point to really embrace the fact that we need the young group of players that we have to really have the freedom to declare themselves as to what the future of our team ultimately will look like and the style of play.

This year for us is as much about anything as getting a baseline of where we're at now that we have a grouping of young players that will compete to figure out who will be here for the long term and who can help us cultivate the next era of Thunder basketball. I think that's incredibly exciting, but I also think it's necessary.

There's going to be challenges that come with that. I don't see any reason why we should be shying away from that. I think I said this at the end of my press conference last year. I don't believe in like bubble wrapping people from adversity. People talk about adversity being really important to growth when it's convenient to them, but I



think it actually is universally important.

So the young teams are going to have some uphill battles at times, but that's how a lot of our break-throughs came last year from a player development standpoint, and I'd expect the confidence that we gained in some of our players and the confidence they gained through going through some of those battles. I'd expect to be able to say the same thing at the end of this season.

We have no idea how the season will unfold. The last couple years, people made pretty strong proclamations about what they thought would take place for the team. Shortly thereafter, the season started, they started to distance themselves from some of the opinions they shared because nobody really understands, and I would never place any limits on our team and the potential of a group that plays the right way as committed to each other and competes.

I thought our team, night in and night out, and this has been a staple for the teams we've had over the course of time, is that we've competed individually and collectively, and some nights were going to be undermanned, as was the case last year at different times. I thought we competed at an extremely high level, and that has to be a constant for us as we build a team going forward.

As I said before, the baseline is to try to figure out where we are and what we have, what we need to add, continuing to build a style of play that maximizes our current players, but our future players, and that's the journey that we're on.

With that said, we're certainly not competing with our past. We've had, as I said, 13 years where we've been one of the better teams in the league. We're going through a cycle that every team in pro sports for the most part enters, and I don't think that we're ever going to be able to go back in time and recreate what has taken place in 2008 because that was over ten years ago. The city itself was in a totally different place and had aspirations of their own, many of which have been reached, and the team had aspirations of their own.

That portion of Thunder history has just been remarkable, and quite frankly, the group of players we have now are certainly standing on the shoulders of the last ten years and the people that have been here and the traditions that have been established. But the beauty of where we are right now is that we're really in an opportunity to craft our own future and start to write our own history knowing that it's going to take time. We've been very open about that and transparent.

I don't see any reason why we should masquerade our

goals in any way. We're trying to build a team that can be sustainable in the Western Conference no less, with a group of young players that are declaring themselves professionally, personally, physically, and collectively, and that's super exciting to us. I think it's a tremendous opportunity.

We also have a lot of humility about the fact that this is a hard thing to do. It's one of the reasons why a lot of people try to avoid it. They don't like to do it because, at the end of the day, it's easier to talk about being competitive but not really trying to do the things that will get you to the top of the mountain, or at least figure out if you can.

I think the most competitive thing to do is to establish a baseline and try to build it organically and grow it organically and build it to sustain, and that's really what we're doing, but we know it's going to take time. If we look at history in the Western Conference, it's publicly available information. You know if you know what your standards are, and you look back at how those teams reached those standards and what it took to get there and how much was in their control and how much wasn't in their control. It's a great lesson versus trying to predict the future, which none of us can predict. I can't even tell you how the first day of practice is going to do, so I definitely can't tell you how the season is going to go.

I do feel it's necessary to let people know. I'm sure there's some people that are worried that we'll take shortcuts or we're just going to try to shortcut the process or lose our discipline, the discipline that we've demonstrated over the course of time or that we're just looking for short-term solutions to what's really a long-term project. I can assure you that less than a calendar year into a process, especially one in which we couldn't practice, and I still feel like we got a lot of answers last year, but that's not really in our purview right now.

We just want to make sure that there's no wasted days, that everything we're doing can be built upon for the future, and I just would say that we don't want to miss any moments because we have some catalysts among us. We have some people, in my opinion, that are going to be honored long term for their efforts during this period of time.

We have a saying in the organization that people celebrate the breakthrough, but what really gets honored is the path, and I'll give you a few examples. As a result of that, I think ultimately when we are playing really high level basketball in Oklahoma City and the arena is on fire and we're in the postseason and fans have witnessed the come up and understand the time, they're going to look back on a few things.



One will be the night that Shai hit that shot against Charlotte last year with .3 seconds on the clock, and it was probably the first time a lot of people said, wait a second, wait a second, this guy's got a chance to be pretty good.

Or I have a little story that I tell people, an opposing coach on the other team one night told me that their best player came to the bench and said, the only thing I can see on the court is Lu Dort. It's the only thing I can see. I can't see past him. He's too wide, and he's everywhere I go. I remember that for me that that is going to be a moment that gets honored because those are the things that people remember when you get the break through is the people, the places, the things that led up to that.

And the last one I would say is I told you the story about the meeting room in Detroit the end of last season, when all the players on that team when we were in that losing streak, put on the board why they played, a lot of people said the community, the organization, my family. Those are the catalysts, the people that are doing the work day to day to get us where we ultimately want to go.

Not everyone is going to be a part of that, but the catalysts need to be honored and the moments need to be honored when we get there, and those moments are going to happen through this season and future seasons as well. With that said, I would open it up to any questions.

**Q. Can you give us an update on the vaccination situation on the team? I'm curious what you've heard to this point on road games because it sounds like some venues may require vaccination. Would that potentially mean you might have some guys, if you aren't 100 percent vaccinated, that might not be available in those instances?**

SAM PRESTI: That doesn't apply to us. All of our guys are vaccinated.

**Q. How do you feel about that in terms of being where you are with that? You mentioned there will probably be disruptions, but how do you feel about where you are in that regard?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think it's great that all the guys are vaccinated, obviously. The disruptions, in my opinion, are going to come by way of the fact that NBA isn't testing players or staff members. Now, organizationally, we're going to be surveillance testing our staff. We're not going to be doing it every day, but we are going to be testing staff, basketball staff. So we try to avoid some outbreaks.

But I think, just based on transmissibility and what we all

know about COVID and the delta variant, there's a lot of people that could be walking around that have it that aren't presenting symptoms that are shedding.

I think naturally there's going to be some outbreak that takes place during the season with teams, so it's more a result of the testing policy than anything else. We're in a new world. These are the rules. We're going to work with those, just like we have, but we're going to do the surveillance testing until the data doesn't drive their reason to do it.

One of the phrases that was used early in this pandemic by Adam Silver was let the data drive the decision. That's what we're doing. We're still adopting that and think that it's probably the best thing for the team and everyone's extended families as well.

**Q. Sam, last we talked about Poku, you said you had a very specific off-season plan for him. He didn't play in the summer league. I was just curious about his progress over the summer and maybe what goals he achieved over the summer?**

SAM PRESTI: Like we said, or you said, we had a specific plan for him. We wanted to make sure that he was focused on just physical training in order to maximize that physical training. The ramp-up to go from not playing -- when the players finish the season, especially a young player like that to play a lot of minutes, you've got to give him time to totally decompress, mentally, physically, emotionally.

The ramp-up to get back to be able to train takes a period of time. This is all based on sports science and a lot of the data that every team uses nowadays.

Once he got to an off-season level of training for his body, we wanted to be able to keep it there. In order to go to an off-season training to play in a summer league that's like a month long periodization process that ramps up. You can't train at the same level from a physical standpoint in the areas we wanted him to focus on and also prepare for summer league.

So we wanted to consolidate all that effort physically for him, and I think he's done an excellent job. The journey for him is going to be continuous, just like every other player on our team. It doesn't matter how old they are. But I think he maximized the time he had in the summer, and now we'll see where that leaves us when he starts training camp.

I think he has a unique set of skills and talent, but he's going to have to fight. He's going to have to compete.



He's far from having established himself as a player in the NBA, but the steps he took this summer, I think, are going to give him the best opportunity to realize his talent.

**Q. In your opening statement, you mentioned Coach performing well within the framework of the way you have to build your teams in Oklahoma City. Can you lay out, in your eyes, exactly what that is, how you have to build in Oklahoma City, so that people have a full understanding of it? Because all of this stuff goes back to that.**

SAM PRESTI: I think we've been pretty clear about that, to be honest with you. I'm happy to do it again, but since the day we've been here in 2008, we've been very, very consistent and very open about the way in which we build, and the way in which we build is connected to our goals, and our goals are to build teams that could be sustainable.

That goes back to, again, what your expectations are and what your goals are. Excuse me. What your expectations are and the way in which you build are totally tied together.

So if you want to lower your expectations, you can change the way you build and be a Little bit more short-term oriented, but if you want to have high aspirations and high performing teams of years upon years, you can't do that and think you can do it quickly or with shortcuts.

The other thing for us is this is not an excuse for us, but we've been extremely successful over the last decade, but free agency is not a pathway that's generally taken advantage of by a lot of mid to small market teams. It's not. It's factually not the case with regard to elite players.

So generally for us, we've built our teams through the draft, through player development, and through trades in a way in which we could sustain them over time because, as we've seen in Oklahoma City, a season can be derailed by an injury at the absolute wrong time, a season can be derailed by a player leaving. There's things that happen that are out of your control, so the more opportunity and sustainability you build into your program, I think, gives you a better chance, especially when you don't have quick fix options as readily available in terms of elite talent as some other places.

That doesn't mean we can't be incredibly successful. We can. It just means that we have to do it a Little bit differently. I've never really heard of anybody that's been achieved anything great that said, A, it was easy, or B, they took a shortcut and did it, or C, they did it as fast as they could and rushed it.

I just think that we're applying the same principles that we always have. We're just going through a different cycle,

and I think, Mark, to your question, has a great passion for player development. He understands the values of the organization and the vision of the organization, and he's unafraid of sharing that with the players and making it a really unified front and bringing everyone together toward that vision, and we have a lot of guys I think in house right now that are really hungry to help us create that through the next several years.

**Q. Sam, Shai signed his extension. Basically you guys agreed to that as soon as possible. How important was that sort of on the off-season checklist? And can you give us an update on where he is health-wise entering this year?**

SAM PRESTI: Let me start with the second part first. He's in a great spot. I watched him workout this morning. We've got a full gym of guys that are here training and working. One of the reasons why I think he's in the position he is and looks the way he does right now is we took a really conservative approach last season, as everybody knows, to make sure he wasn't dealing with this on and off, especially if he was going to play on the national team, and right now he's good to go. He has no limitations at all.

As far as what you asked initially about the extension, it's wonderful. I think it's great. I think it's great for him. He's certainly one of the bright rising stars in the NBA, but the thing about him and the thing that I really appreciate and I think is a great thing for our organization is his mindset and his mentality is really mature. He understands the process of improvement. He understands how to stay present. He knows things don't happen overnight.

His own development and his own personal path is very reflective of somebody that has a high level of maturity in terms of a competitor. He lets things come to him. He understands the long game. And that's just a beautiful alignment with our organization and something that we talk about quite a bit because I think his mentality is that of somebody that really understands how to compete and not just the macho aspect of competition, but the intellectual level of competition.

I think he's an incredible player for that reason as well as his physical attributes.

**Q. Sam, as you said, a very young team, but you've got a notable veteran in Derrick Favors? What's your expectation of his role, what it's going to be? Is he one of those guys, like you've had last year or so, you're looking to move, or is he going to be part of the team going forward?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, with Derrick, one of the things he



brings for us is he's got a great defensive stability. He's got a great physicality to him. He's a pro. I'm excited to see how he fits in with the team. Again, as I said earlier, like we have to see how the season unfolds, and we've done that every year, but the last two years, I think that was really important for us to let that happen and not make any kind of predetermined judgments.

But I think he can help the team, absolutely. He's a Little bit different than like an AI because of how often AI had the ball in his hands and the facilitating ability that AI had, but Derrick brings -- everyone's who's seen him knows what he does and what he adds to the team, and we're excited about having him.

**Q. Just going back a Little bit, you spoke to the craziness of last season and last off-season. Can you just speak to the value that the normalcy of a summer league and a full training camp have going into this season, this young roster. I think of a guy like Theo who didn't have that last season, and even the staff as well, what kind of value that has for them?**

SAM PRESTI: The first, it seems like a regular off-season to us, but it still really wasn't. It was still the second shortest in the history of the NBA. It's helpful, I think as much as anything, the mobility and the ability to talk with people, see people. Last year we really couldn't come out of our offices. I need to underscore we didn't really practice last year, and for a young team that needs a lot of nurturing and teaching and explanation and time together, practice is a big factor.

I think that's going to have a bigger influence on our organic nature. As I said earlier, like the baseline we have to establish. I think we have a much clearer pathway to establish a baseline of where we are, what we need to add, what the style of play could potentially evolve into. We're not going to get all of those answers in one season, but I think we really are starting that in earnest this year, partially because the team is inexperienced and young, but I think it has to be for us to kind of get into this process.

Summer league, I think, is helpful because it's the one opportunity that you see some competition in over the summer, but the first six days of practice will be equally as valuable. The value of the summer league, in my opinion, is the camaraderie that gets built, the relationships that can begin to get formed, the lead-up and the practice out there.

For a young group of guys, as I said earlier, that's trying to declare themselves -- and ultimately, they're really fighting and clawing and scratching to be a part of the next, to build the identity of the team going forward. The principles of the team, the values of the team, those things are

unwavering. They don't change from the day we showed up to this second, we have a certain level of principles and values that we stand by and stand on.

The identity of the team is constantly evolving, and I think a lot of the guys we have now see an opportunity to be catalysts to the next break through, and that starts in summer league with relationship building, leadership opportunities, dealing with adversities, dealing with successes. It's something I really love being around to watch it because those moments are the ones that everybody celebrates.

People still talk about the way we started in 2008 being 3-29. They don't talk about the day we arrived, meaning like the day it became clear that we were one of the better teams in the league. It's all of those moments beforehand where someone started to show that they were going to be a really good player, or somebody, we had a buzzer beating win that showed that we can play with some of the better teams in the league.

That's the phase that's important to recognize when you're in it because those are the things people honor about organizations, and I'm really excited because I think we're really in the midst of that.

**Q. A couple things about Josh Giddey. First of all, how's he doing health-wise? Were you able to get anything out of his summer league given how few minutes he was able to play?**

SAM PRESTI: Before I answer that question, I have to ask you a question. Are you a Cardinals fan, like a diehard Cardinals fan?

**Q. Yeah, Matt Tumbleson and I go round and round a bit.**

SAM PRESTI: That was my question. So what's your favorite Cardinals team? Do you have a team where you became a Cardinals fan?

**Q. The 1982 World Series team against the Brewers. I have a record you would appreciate. I have an old album. It's the Cardinals season highlights with Joe Buck, covering all the highlights in the season.**

SAM PRESTI: I remember I got smitten in baseball as a young kid in '84, '85, and I remember Tommy Herr, Ozzie Smith combination in that '85 World Series, and the year before that was Padres-Tigers that totally sold me. I always remember the Cardinals with those teams with McGee and all that. Anyway.

Josh Giddey, far from Tommy Herr. He's fine. It was an ankle sprain. The worst thing in those situations in summer league is when somebody gets Nicked up like that, and you just don't have enough time to get them back before the summer league is over. Then if you could even get them back, by the end of the summer league, the games deteriorate pretty quickly.

So, he's doing good. As I said to Paris, the goal at summer league, you'd love to see him play. We're going to learn as much in six days of practice as we would in the summer league, but just being around the guys, getting in a routine, building relationships, getting a sense for how things are done.

The one advantage I think Josh has, if we're looking at a silver lining, is he played in a men's league the whole year. The competition he was playing against is equal or probably better than the summer league, quite frankly. It's just impatience to like get him a chance to get out there and see that.

But if you're a rational person, if you have common sense, you would realize that you just have to wait a Little bit longer to get to that point. Then pretty soon you'll see him every day, and it won't be as dramatic that you didn't see him for a few days.

**Q. Yeah, I'm a Cardinals fan too, and I still hate the Kansas City Royals because of what they did in the '85 World Series. Sam, real quick, you know, this isn't building again from Oklahoma City. You were talking about Oklahoma City is not the same city it was in '08. It's a completely different city now. It's not building something from scratch. It's real building what -- you say you're not playing against the past, but it's rebuilding to something you want again.**

Now, I just want to know about your frustrations of maybe having to not go through as many steps, like in these other places that you do in Oklahoma City. I know you talked about that. And rebuilding. I'm not asking are you still passionate about what you're doing, but where is the passion focused now? Because you are rebuilding something in this city and everything isn't brand new anymore.

SAM PRESTI: I don't know if I understand that question totally, but I'm going to do my best, and if I don't answer it, I'd like you to say that's not what I asked.

I don't see it as a frustration at all. I actually see the opportunity to build a team in Oklahoma City as a tremendous -- it's a tremendous opportunity. We have to do it a little bit differently than maybe in some other places.

That doesn't mean it's the end of the world at all because I think the reality is -- I go back to the same thing. If you have expectations of having a sustainably elite team, you have to figure out a path that's going to get you there. It has to be based on evidence. It can't be based on whimsical wants. You have to have some level of intellectual integrity to your plan relative to your expectations.

You can certainly change the plan, but the expectations have to change with that. So our expectations are to have another really good team for a long period of time. As I said before, I've never seen anybody accomplish anything enduring and say it was either easy, was a lot easier than they thought it was going to be, didn't have any challenges, it happened in one fell swoop. The way we would approach those things in any other business, which is you can be an architect, you can be a lawyer, you can be a plumber, you can be any walk of life, anything you do that requires sustained endurance and sustained success takes a certain amount of principle of patience, discipline, commitment, resilience, selflessness. Those things are really embedded.

The reality is, and this is a good thing about the NBA, you can't really build teams the same way in every city. I think every city has their advantages and disadvantages. I think we're pretty clear on what our advantages are if we want to have those standards. If our standards were different, we might be able to change our strategies, but our strategy is pretty clear based on our standards. I don't see this as frustrating. I see that as I think that makes you have to be sharper.

I think you have to think many years out. I think you have to demonstrate -- it's hard not to make short-term decisions. Like that's one thing about being patient. Patience is an active activity. It's an active, active action because there's opportunities every single day to do things that would short circuit your longer term vision or plans.

That's actually the harder thing to do. The easiest thing to do is to kind of cloak yourself in this idea that you're trying really hard but you're actually doing things that make you mediocre. The hardest thing to do is to take a path of discipline, commitment, and aspiration. I really want you to hear me when I say that. That's the hardest path. So the most competitive thing to do is to try to reach those goals. It's a lot easier to say you're trying to do that but your actions don't really lead up to that. So we've been very transparent about it. I don't see any reason not to be.

**Q. So you've been really clear about the patience aspect of things. I remember back to your piece with the Oklahoman, kind of starting this shift toward the**

**rebuild, but when you've studied NBA history, and in your experience, did you ever have like a time frame in mind of it's going to take this long to kind of probably build to where you need to go? Or is it just so fluid that you can't even put those kind of expectations on it?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I'd look at it this way. If you think about history, history is there because it's happened already and it can be researched. If you research it unbiasedly, if you research it without confirmation bias and you look at it rationally, it can be very informative. But you have to decide what the standards are and what you're trying to accomplish. Look at that within the West and do a study on that.

That's a lot easier and informative than trying to predict the future. No one can predict the future. If you go back and look at history -- and everyone can go and do that. You don't need me to tell you about it. You can then also look at, well, here are the teams that I would like us to be like or have this type of success, and then you can unwind there. Well, how did that happen? How long did it take?

A lot of the times, the teams that accelerate that process beyond the average -- because, obviously, there's an average -- the ones that accelerate, there's usually some event or something that happens that's out of their control but happens in a very positive way. There's also teams that potentially are decelerated. Sometimes there's things that happen that are out of their control that way.

We've never as an organization tried to own the fact that we've had a lot of really good fortune over time. We've had a lot of players turn out to be better than we anticipated, and they've been really good. I'd like to think we helped that a little bit with our player development programs over the years and the environment that we can try to create.

I think our fans play a role in that, in that they're supportive. They are optimistic about players. They show up every night, win or lose, and they understand the beauty of watching a young player cut their teeth and ultimately have them go from a young person to a mature competitor.

The best way for me to answer that question is the research is there. If you look at it rationally and in an unbiased fashion, it gives you a great indicator, and then you can also unwind, well, why did that happen so quickly, or why did that not happen so quickly? It's usually traced to things that happened that are unpredictable, but I couldn't give you a specific time frame. I'm not trying to avoid it. It's more just I'd be guessing just like you would. I'm a believer that, if you stick with principles, if you stick with a consistent approach, if you're humble in the task and

the challenge at hand, we'll have some good fortune along the way. Someone will turn out to be a little better than we thought. Maybe we'll get some luck along the way.

We're going to need that. Every good team needs that. It's amazing how quickly we forget. Some of the teams we picked at the very top of the draft this year, like they're going to be off to a great start, but before the draft, they got the benefit of moving up. That doesn't mean that all those players are going to work out. That doesn't mean that the player, that Josh Giddey isn't going to be a great player. We don't know. But you have to have some things go your way, there's no question about it.

The best way to really get to the root of your question is to look at history.

**Q. I wanted to ask you actually about Kemba. You guys agreed to a buyout with him, which you've not done a lot of buy-outs with guys. Can you kind of talk us through that and why that ended up being the reality with him, where maybe it hasn't with other guys in the past?**

SAM PRESTI: Great question. I'm glad you're asking that actually. It feeds right into, first of all, I can't see enough good things about Kemba Walker. Great guy. I only knew him for briefly, but great guy. He's a pro, and I think he's going to do great things in New York.

But it goes back to what I was saying in my open, which is the baseline. I think it's important that now that we're almost a year into things, that we need to let the young group of guys that we have kind of fight that battle and declare their own identities and the future identity of the team with the group that we know has a chance to potentially sustain over time.

Kemba was great, but clearly this wasn't the last stop for him. I think we were going to be having to accommodate something at the middle of the season or at the end of the season, and at the end of the day, I think there's a lot more value in our young players discovering themselves, coming together as a team, and whatever success we earned this year is earned in a way that can then be thrown into the future as we continue to build.

If you have Kemba Walker here, you're working around him to a degree. This is not in a negative sense, but truthfully with where we are, we need a baseline on what we have so we could measure progress. It's really hard to measure the progress of our team if you have a player like that, knowing that he's probably not a long-term fixture here, and we had to make that decision because I think it's important for us to get a sense of where we are.

Albeit we know that there could be some challenges in front of us and there will be some nights where it would be nice to have him, but the long term interests of the organization is in us kind of establishing who we're going to be going forward, including style of play, which can be cultivated. And I think for our coaching staff, the chance to kind of lay that groundwork in a way that can be scaleable over time.

Then, obviously, you saw the benefits of opportunities for some younger players. And then there's the leadership component for some of our guys that, as I said earlier, we have some catalysts ahead of us that can help us through this period of time, and it will be a great challenge for them, but if they can do it, they could be really honored organizationally.

**Q. I know you've been asked a ton about the rebuild, but I wanted to go a little bit of a different route with it. Oklahoma City is still, as you know, a unique NBA market, and like you said, you guys have predominantly only had success. The college sports teams around here have a lot of success, so fans are used to that in some way. I don't know how big the faction of fans is, but there's some people who seem not on board with the rebuild or not wanting to be patient.**

I guess what would you say to fans who maybe don't agree with your process or don't understand it fully?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, the first thing I'd say is we're one season into that. So like I'm trying not to be dismissive of the question. We're one season into it. The season was -- I mean, a season we didn't even know we were going to play because of the health issues, and then it was abbreviated, and everyone was just trying to get through it.

The other thing is just I would say it all comes down to standards and expectations. Rational thinking and the understanding that to achieve something that is sustainable. In Oklahoma City there's certain paths that you have to give yourself a chance to pursue. We can always reroute that and lower our expectations, and that would alter our path, but every team in the NBA goes through a cycle.

We've been able to stave that cycle off for quite a while, more than ten years. If there was a 50-win team sitting in front of us for the next five years at the time that we pivoted, we certainly would have continued to do that, but we didn't opt in to this. This is just the pathway that most teams have to follow, and we're no different. We're not, because we're Oklahoma City, we don't get to jump the line

to do it easier.

Some people may make the argument that it's harder, but that's not going to stop our commitment. It's not going to stop our aspiration. We know what's possible, but we also know that you have to earn your way and pay the price.

That's one thing about our city and our community. I don't think Oklahomans expect things to be given to them. I don't think they expect things to be handed to them. I never really heard Oklahomans talk about taking the easy way or shortcutting things or not putting in a hard day's work or not earning what you get. And they're definitely not about acting like they're doing one thing and doing another.

We can tell you we're trying as hard as we can and doing it the hardest way by avoiding the hardest way. The most competitive thing to do, in my opinion, is to really try to do something great and build it from the ground up. It's easy to burn the boats to get to the middle, but we're trying to avoid that. We can always do that.

**Q. If I can sneak in one more totally unrelated, The Blue playing at Paycom is a totally unique situation in the NBA as far as a G League team having a permanent home in an NBA arena. Can you just tell us how that sort of game together with them losing the Cox Convention Center?**

SAM PRESTI: First, it has been done. I don't know that anyone else is doing it now, but it has been done.

**Q. Not currently.**

SAM PRESTI: Not currently, yeah. And you also answered your own question when you have that we lost the Cox Convention Center. We were nudged out of the Cox Convention Center pretty quickly and just didn't have a great plan that we felt comfortable with, short or long term, to play with the Blue.

I'm actually really interested to see how it goes. It may be something that we really like. So we're super open minded about it. I think there could be some real benefits to that, but I'd like to go through the year and see how it goes before I make any judgments. We were very happy where we were. It just wasn't meant to be that we could stay there.

**Q. It's been a while since you've had a high draft pick, top ten type guy, top six or seven type guy. Maybe Harden was the last one. Anyway, how much pressure is on a guy like Giddey, who cost you -- not cost you, but he went so high, a lot of expectations on him. How much extra pressure is on a guy like that because of**

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**his draft position compared to just a normal rookie?**

SAM PRESTI: The conversation I have with the players is really simple. People don't really remember where guys were drafted after the first couple years. The reason why is because the draft never goes in order. The best players don't go one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. We have players all over our roster that are a good example of that.

I could be wrong, but I think Josh is the only player drafted in the top ten that we have on the entire roster. We haven't drafted in the top five since 2008, I think.

I think that every rookie, every first year player puts enough pressure on themselves. I don't think it matters where they're necessarily drafted. They're just trying to get to the gym on time and figure out like what the cadence of a season is.

The thing with Josh, remember, I think he's probably the youngest player in the entire league. I don't know that, but I think he must be. So he's going to be learning a lot, and it's going to be a real process for him as time goes on. He has demonstrated the ability to play at a high level in a pretty good league, but there's going to be some growing pains, there's going to be some learning.

But I can't answer your question like how much pressure. There's not pressure from us because, once you're in the door here, no matter how you arrived, everybody gets treated the same way and we have the same standards for all of our young players relative to how to assimilate into the team, which is like you've got to have professional habits, what it means to be a Thunder player, the core attributes that we're looking for off the floor all come first, and we want them to get really good at those things.

Then we start layering on obviously fundamental basketball things with that, but it's a real process for a young player. Darius Bazley is going into his third year here, and he's still scratching the surface ultimately. I feel good about his foundation, and when we get to Giddey's third year, I think we'll be saying the same thing. It's a continuous journey for these guys because they're coming in so young.

**Q. I was just curious about you have a lot of international players on your team. I just wonder if you see that as a competitive advantage for you guys and just that you get to know those types of players through film or going to see them or whatnot or if it's just happenstance that those are the guys that are available to you.**

SAM PRESTI: I think a lot of it's happenstance. I think

one thing we always talk about or we fail to talk about, but we talk about internally, is you only get to draft one guy at a spot, but what you never get to see is who are the guys, the two or three guys, in front of that spot that you would have taken. You know what I'm saying? If you're picking at 34th, if the guy that you have ranked 2 was there at 34, you know what I mean?

It's just those were the players that we valued at those places. I do think those guys, the international players, I do think they have tremendous concepts of team. I think they've got tremendous concepts of what it means to be playing within a framework. And a lot of them have international experience in competition, but it's not like a specific thing we're seeking out or trying to add to.

But I do think they have pretty advanced understandings of team dynamics, and they've been through different stages because a lot of them are professional earlier in their careers. But there's not a reason why. But I also think Jeremiah Robinson-Earl playing in Villanova has all of that as well. It's more the things we're looking for than it is where they're coming from.

**Q. I'm assuming that you didn't make the decision yourself, but the decision to only allow fans that are vaccinated or get tested previously to entering the arena, can you speak on the importance of that? And then do you see it as being an issue in OKC?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I can give you a little bit about the process. Obviously, any decision like that is not made by one individual person, but certainly clay is the final decision-maker in anything relative to policies that are relative to fans. But certainly with a lot of consultation with medical professionals in the community and really relying heavily on them because one of the main drivers for the organization is to create the safest environment for our fans and everybody that engages with the Thunder.

Additionally, also really owning our responsibility as a community leader and trying to do the best we can. Given the fact that there's absolutely no good answer to a lot of these questions that we're all being posed with today because we've never been through these types of organizations, so I think the organization tried to do what they felt was the best decision based on the medical information that was provided, based on the mantra of trying to create a safe environment for all of our fans, and then also owning the responsibility as a community leader to do what they felt was in the best interests.

I'm really proud of the fact that this is the direction that they -- that we, I should say -- have taken.



