

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Monday, September 27, 2021
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Mark Daigneault Press Conference



MARK DAIGNEAULT: Thanks, guys. Welcome. It's good to see everybody in the flesh. First of all, just want to -- I think it's important this time of year to just thank Mr. Bennett and Sam and the whole Thunder staff, everybody just puts us in an unbelievable position to be successful as we head into training camp every year, and I don't want to overlook our gratitude for all the people that help make it happen and put us in position to really just focus on the season and focus on basketball.

We're really excited, obviously. We're excited about seeing our players again. They put in a lot of good work over the summer. As you guys know, we have a really young roster and young players change quickly, especially when they can put intentional work in, and that's what our guys have done this summer. So we're excited to assess them and see where they're at in a competitive environment in training camp.

I think it's also important just from a team level to start the season and really try to tap into the foundations and principles of the organization that have existed here over time because of the type of way that these seems have played and carry themselves, and that's simple. We want to be really, really professional, as teams have always been here. We want to compete every night at a really high level and do so together, and we want to work really hard every day and really attack the program in a holistic way.

However, we do have a pretty unique opportunity this year with this particular team because we have a blank canvas kind of staring at us in the face. It's not often that you get that opportunity, especially with a team that's layered with young talent like we are, and we're excited about attacking that challenge and seeing what we can make of it. How we play, the personality of the team, the identity of the team is all unwritten at this point, and that's a great opportunity and responsibility.

It's going to be great challenges along the way that we're willing to run head first into, but if we get it right, we can build something that not only maximizes this particular

group of people and this particular group of guys but that can put us in position to build into the future, which I know Sam has talked at length about.

We have a group of people starting with our players but all across the organization that are really inspired and motivated by that challenge, and so we can't wait to take that on and see what we can make of it.

Q. Talk about Shai thus far. I know you guys shut him down last year, just being as safe as possible. How is he physically? And considering what we saw in limited time last year, what's your expectation of how he's going to evolve this season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Sure. First of all, he's fully healthy. He's been in the gym the last few weeks. He looks great. Looks great physically, looks great on the court, and he's moving great. So no concerns there. He's full go.

Obviously I'm really excited for him with the contract extension. That's a great thing not only for his security, but it's a great testament to what he's done in a short period of time in his career. I'm excited for us, and the real reason is because as I mentioned, from a professionalism standpoint, competitiveness, work ethic, those things are organizational building blocks and foundations, and he embodies them and is very naturally aligned with those things, and when your best players have the same qualities as the team you want to have, that's a powerful, powerful thing.

But as hard as he competes, as hard as he works, and those are emotional things, competing and working, as hard as he puts his whole self into every single day, what makes him I think really unique is he's got a very sophisticated approach to competition, and he's able to really see around the corner, see the big picture. He understands the relationship between this game and today's work and something that he's building or something that the team is building, and that's a pretty advanced mentality for any competitor. It's certainly advanced for somebody at his age.

But it's a mentality that organizationally we hang our hat on, and again, when we have a player of his caliber that has that mentality, you're talking about real forward momentum when you've got that kind of alignment, and we



think we have that, and that's why aside from his talent, obviously, we're so excited about Shai.

Q. Just wanted to check, is everyone available going into training camp?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, short answer is yes. The one guy, Favors, has a little bit of swelling in his knee. He's not injured. He will participate in camp, but we're going to take a cautious approach with him in terms of reps. We're prioritizing him being ready for the regular season, and he just need to totally get his knee going again, and he's on a separate plan, but that's just full disclosure. He's taking reps tomorrow, to be perfectly clear.

Q. Wanted to ask a separate question about Poku. You said you had a separate plan for him this summer as it related to his development. I think it was a bit of a surprise he didn't play in Summer League. Why was that, and what was that specific plan for him?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, it's pretty simple. I think Sam mentioned it the other day, too, but from a physical standpoint, obviously as young as he is, any player that age is pretty underdeveloped for the NBA physically, not only from a strength standpoint but from a durability standpoint, being able to play 72 games last year, 82 games this year. That requires pretty intensive physical buildup, and we decided we were going to make that priority number one in the summertime.

To really truly prioritize that, if putting all your eggs in that basket is a ten out of ten, if you play him in Summer League, you're probably operating at like a seven out of ten because you have to pull the plug on his physical development and start building him up basketball-wise, and we thought the cost of that was too high.

I think the amount of minutes he played last year gave us a lot of confidence that the lost minutes of Summer League were well worth that sacrifice in order to just get every last ounce of physical gain that we could get. He was on board with that plan and he did a great job of attacking it over the summer, and so we think that he's at the highest capacity he could possibly be at at this point physically in the game.

Q. You said it's kind of a blank slate; with that being said, what's, I guess, fair to expect? It's hard to say when so many pieces are young, some new, what's fair to expect, how do you set goals when the -- I guess when the slate is blank, as you say?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, so when you talk about expectations, I think the expectations in the organization

are high as it relates to things that we can control. When it comes to goals, we think of those things more in terms of standards. So we have high expectations as it relates to our standards. We have high expectations in terms of professionalism, high expectations in terms of our players really attacking a holistic program of development, high expectations in terms of how we can compete, and competing together, having a team that kind of embodies the lunch pail mentality of the state and really leaning into that, especially at this phase of the team.

And you can expect us to continue to grow through every experience. The NBA season is challenging and there's a lot of ups and downs, but we're going to be a team that learns from our successes, learns from our adversities, and uses every experience for forward momentum, and I've said this before, I said it last year, and I think it's important to note, those would be our expectations regardless of where our team is in terms of a cycle. If you told us we're projected to win the championship this year, those would still be our expectations, and our goals would still be tied more to a way of operating and our standards than any like single outcome.

Q. You said that you wanted to learn from your successes and also your adversaries. What do you think your biggest adversary this season is going to be?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, the first one is it's an 82-game NBA season. The schedule, you have 41 road games, you're traveling, it's condensed every year. You're playing against the best teams and players in the world in the league, and I think we're leaning into the fact that we have the youngest roster in the NBA, and there are challenges that come with that, physical challenges, there's the mental challenges that our players probably don't have the instincts or the wisdom of other teams.

And then it just becomes about how do you approach it when you know that that constraint exists, and it's pretty simple: You approach it with a competitive spirit that's consistent, you approach it in a way that you're going to do it together every single night and you're going to work every single day. There's just no shortcut and it's not going to be easy and we don't want it to be easy. I think Sam made that clear the other day. We are interested in building something special. We are interested in building something to last.

The only way to do that is with your bare hands and your sleeves rolled up, and we're leaning right into that, and I think we have a group of players that understand that, similar to how I talked about Shai. They understand the need to roll your sleeves up and work, and that's exactly

what we're going to do. Whatever challenges come our way, that's going to be our response.

Q. You had a lot of guys last year pick up valuable playing time, starting time, as well. How deep is your bench this year with all the experience those guys got last year?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think we're layered with a lot of talent, a lot of young talent, and I think -- I don't know how we're going to play in our first exhibition game or how we're going to play in the first game of the season. But I do know that because of the age of most of our players, our team is going to be better at the end of the year than it is at the start.

I think that's pretty predictable, when you give young players reps and they work hard and they attack the program, they improve. That's not to say that it's always linear and it's not to say that it's always going to be visible to the naked eye, but we're expecting significant improvement as we saw last year again this year because of the age of most of our players.

But we're excited about the roster and the competition that that creates in training camp. We think that's healthy. We think that's our way forward in terms of establishing that level of competitiveness and work. We're excited about -- I'm really excited about the roster.

Q. When the roster construction, it's pretty interesting with Giddey, Poku, Bazley, after SGA, bigger guys that can all handle the ball. As the head coach, when you got all that together, how much are you looking forward to being able to putting out a lineup that's going to be a matchup nightmare, and what might be the challenges of having that many jumbo ball handlers?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, I think one of the things that I think is pretty evident, especially when you watch the Playoffs, and not just this year's Playoffs, every year's Playoffs is -- the teams that are the most formidable in the NBA are the ones that offensively have multiple creators, multiple ball handlers, multiple sound decision makers, and those teams figure out a way to function together and to make the whole better than the sum of the parts. I think that's the challenge for any team.

Certainly as we build and we move forward, something -- I don't want to speak for Sam, but something that I think he's made very clear is that we want versatile players that can do a lot of things out there, and then it's the job of certainly me and our coaching staff and our players, as well, to make that fit together and to make sure that we're

enhancing everybody's strengths.

That's exactly what we plan on doing. But having multiple versatile players and ball handlers is not a weakness. That's a strength, and that's something that we certainly have to work to figure out and make sure that we're optimizing everybody's talent.

But we're really excited about what our players are capable of and how that can all fit together.

Q. Obviously having a year of experience under your belt is going to help you as a coach, but how do you think having a somewhat normal off-season is going to help you as a coach?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, forget about just me individually. I'll lump myself into the whole group here. But I think last year with obviously the uncertainties of COVID and really the last like season and a half, I'd lump the bubble in there, those times have really caused us to be really resourceful and resilient and really light on our feet. I think it's really like stress-tested us organizationally and certainly our players and our ability to do those things.

This year is really about capitalizing on opportunity, and there's opportunities we have this year that we just haven't had in the last season and a half. One of them is just very simply we're going to practice more because of the way the schedule lays out. We're very excited about that, especially with a young team. Not every team takes advantage of practice opportunities, but we have to in order to maximize development of our players.

The Blue is playing a full season, and again, with a young team, being able to maximize development opportunities is critical when you have 17 guys and most of them are at the early stages of their career, so being able to platoon guys to the Blue from time to time is good.

The opportunity to play in front of our fans and engage with them is something we're really excited about. We haven't seen our fans here in 18 months, I think. I know our players are thrilled about that. I am, as well.

We have the opportunity to have a team, like I said, layered, and when I say "layered," I mean at every spot we are layered with young talent, and we're going to let those guys compete and see what we can come up with in terms of the best version of this team and also the version of the team that's going to lay the strongest foundation for us moving forward.

Q. You'd mentioned Shai and some of his qualities, and it sounds like he's got some leadership qualities.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

When you have a young team, obviously finding those people who are the leaders of your group can be challenging because they have to maybe grow into it a little bit. Do you feel like you have those guys here, and who are the people maybe that folks are gravitating to in terms of those leadership qualities?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, I mean, certainly Shai. But we have a saying I think I've mentioned to you guys before, talked to our team about it, and that is the leader is the person doing the right thing. So when you define leadership like that, it's entitled to no one. I'm the head coach, but if I'm not doing the right thing in the moment, I'm not leading. It's also accessible to everybody.

Aaron Wiggins or Josh Giddey or Tre or Jeremiah are rookies, but if they're doing the right thing tomorrow, they're leading in that moment. I think we have a lot of guys across the roster that do that. Obviously Shai comes to mind. Lu Dort I mentioned having a young team, and the physical challenges that that presents on some nights, and Lu is a guy that really helps us stick our chest out as a team with his physicality and his mentality, there's just a fearlessness and a will to him that I think is contagious. When you're rolling up next to him, you have a little bit more confidence. That's another example.

If you name a guy, I think I can tell you how they have the opportunity to lead and how they have led, and I think we have leadership all across our roster because we have guys that are willing to do the right thing and really commit to doing the things that we think are going to help us be successful and also lay a really strong foundation for this build.

Q. You mentioned Derrick Favors earlier. With him being such an experienced guy what have you seen so far with some of his interactions with some of the young guys in the front court?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, we'll see more obviously in camp. It's been pretty informal over the last few weeks, but he's a pro's pro. That's a reputation that precedes him in everything that -- every touch point we've had with him to this point doubles down on that.

Having guys -- we talk about development all the time. There's player development, obviously, which is you need to get your young guys on the court and get them reps, but we're also trying to develop other things. We're trying to develop our program, trying to develop our environment. We're trying to develop an identity and how we're going to play. We're trying to develop a mentality of how we want to think. We're trying to develop behaviors that we think will lead to longer term success.

When you have a guy like him that kind of walks the walk, and we learned this over the past few years with some of the veteran players we've had here, those guys help us really develop those team things and those programatic things, and Derrick, Muscala, Kenrich Williams, those are guys certainly that help us do that, and everything he's shown us so far is consistent with what we've heard about him.

Q. Talking to some guys last year, it seemed like you were able to connect with them quite well in your first year. I'm just wondering, you're not in an entirely unique situation, but having not played college basketball or the NBA, you're different from some NBA coaches in that sense. Is that something you've had to overcome at all, or what have been the challenges of that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, first of all, I think you're never on an island, and the thing I would say is that there's really a village mentality here that I benefit from as it relates to player relationships. I think when they come in the building, their energy goes up. I think it's a place where they feel safe to be who they are and can really be authentic to who they are. I think work itself and the competitive experience is a vulnerable thing, and if you're around a group of people that you feel are judging you or that you don't feel safe around, that can be really hard to do.

I think that we collectively as an organization take a lot of pride in having people around our players, whether it's guys that have played professionally here, we have plenty of those in the organization, or people like myself that have not played. We really try to band together and just create the most optimal environment that we possibly can for our players to operate towards the capacity of who they can be.

I think the relational part of it, you mentioned building relationships, I think I benefit from that because I'm a part of that. I think if you asked our players about anybody else in our organization, you'd get very similar answers, and I think it's because we're all in it together, and the focus is around our players and how we can best optimize them as people and the development of them as players.

Q. As far as your staff goes, Kameron Woods being promoted to an assistant coach and adding Eric Maynor from the Blue staff, what do those two guys bring?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think our staff collectively, I think we have a diversity of perspectives. I think the staff has a

lot of energy. I think the staff is very compassionate. I think the staff really is empathic and tries to see things through the lens of the player. We really just try to walk with our players. For guys like Kam and Eric and Mike Wilks that have played at this level, that kind of comes naturally, but even for Bliss, David Akinyooye and myself, Zach Peterson, the rest of our staff, we really try to put ourselves in their shoes and really walk with them.

Like I said, that's not a coaching staff thing, that's a Thunder thing. So I would say that extends to everybody from our chefs to the people in our medical staff, performance staff, anybody that touches our players I think has a similar mentality, and we feel like if we do that every day, that has great power and is going to help our players be their best, and that's all we're about.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.