

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Mark Daigneault

Press Conference



MARK DAIGNEAULT: I'm going to lead it. I just want to acknowledge a couple groups of people. I want to publicly thank our players for their effort this season, their commitment level to our program, professionalism, and just the mindset they brought to the gym and to the court every single day. It was very impressive. They continue to raise the bar despite being a group of relatively young professionals.

I want to thank our staff, especially the ones that had their hands on the players every day, talked to our players about attacking the program, but in order for that to work, the staff has to put a good program on and a program where, if the players attack it, they'll improve, and I think we've done that for the last couple years, as well.

I want to thank our front office, Sam, Mr. Bennett, the people that move with the team and our players have every resource we need to achieve at a high level and be successful, and that doesn't happen by accident, and so we're incredibly grateful for the opportunities that we get from everybody that's an arm's length away from the team, not only Mr. Bennett and Sam but our front office and all our extended staff that have a great impact on our team.

I want to thank our fans for being in the fight with us. It was great having our fans back in the arena this year only made us more excited as we continue to move forward. And I want to thank you guys for being a conduit to the fans and your professionalism and fairness over my time here.

With that, I'll take whatever you guys have.

Q. You mentioned that this has obviously been a young team and there have been a lot of ups and downs, you know COVID, a lot of setbacks, but what did you think of the way the group came together this season considering that there were a lot of new faces and it was a young group?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: As a baseline, we want to be a team that from an identity standpoint you watch us play

and you say, that team competes together. That's who we want to be, and that's just going to be an unbelievably important quality and ingredient for our team as we continue to move forward.

This particular group of guys, not only this season but last season, has established a baseline of competitiveness and connectedness that we think can scale forward and that is critically important for us scaling forward.

Q. From a basketball standpoint, you started the season at the old practice facility, wanted to set that foundation of identity. What do you think in terms of offensive/defensive identity you guys were able to accomplish in kind of setting that this year?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, the purpose of that was to kind of tap into the tradition of the organization, which is tricky. We're proud of the organization's origins and the teams and players that have been here before and we think tapping into that is an advantage for us, but we're also a new iteration and a new cycle of the team, and we need to chart our own course, and there's a blank slate that we're staring at and continue to be staring at.

I think this season was another positive step in the right direction environmentally, stylistically, programatically and with the development of individual players.

Q. Obviously this season was a huge developmental season for every player on the roster, but if you had to give a most-improved award, who would you give it to?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: It's tough. I mean, I think the overall development of the environment, like having an environment where people come in and can operate close to their potential every day, the development of our program continuing to make sure that the program we're putting on is one that is best practice in every way possible, and the development of our system, our huge, huge kind of pillars of what we're trying to get done here, and that allows our players to grow and thrive in their individual development, I think that happened.

I also think that the individual development of one player can be contagious to the other players, and I think that's where you really get cooking in a developmental



environment where momentum is gained through me watching you develop and you watching me develop, and I thought we established that with this particular group this season.

Q. When you were hired two years ago, you certainly knew it was going to be a rebuild. Two years into that, what's been the biggest challenge for you as a coach through this process?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I mean, just the challenges of an NBA season. I mean, nothing more than that. The biggest challenge for me this year was we had our first baby in November, and that was challenging in terms of wanting to make sure that I was doing the right stuff there and also doing right by the job.

The level of clarity that Sam has put forth with this whole thing I think makes it very easy to be committed to it, and so I think you see kind of a united front all the way across the board, from our staff to our extended staff to our players and to a large extent our fans.

I think part of that is born out of the clarity of what we're doing. We're not hiding what we're doing. We've been very clear what we're doing, why we're doing it, and we're aiming high.

That's the other thing is there's certainly rough nights for every single team and every single player and coach, but it's in pursuit of aiming high, and that makes it very easy to put that in perspective and make that part of kind of our rise.

I'm excited to be a part of that.

Q. What did you learn most about Shai this year?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, I continue to be impressed with Shai's ability to be in the moment and also see the big picture. I think that's like a very unique combination for anybody, never mind a very young professional with obviously high ambitions and a lot at stake like him.

Yet he does that, he brings unbelievable positivity to the gym every day and is lost in every single day but also is able to connect that to a larger picture, and I think that's incredibly unique.

On the court, I think -- there's game plans for players like him. I think the kitchen sink has been thrown at him, and his ability to remain highly impactful despite all the game plans that are coming his way is the sign of a great player.

It's one thing when you establish yourself and you're kind

of emerging. Once the book is out on you and teams are throwing everything they can to try to stop you from throwing your fastball and you're still throwing it, that's how you know you've got a real one, and he did that.

Q. I think we assume on the outside he's not only your leader as a performer but in the locker room and that sort of thing. Is that the case, and have you seen that part of his game develop?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think he definitely has incredible leadership qualities, especially, like I said, with the spirit he brings to the gym every day and to the team. It's a very, very light and joyful spirit, which is important over the course of the rigors of an 82-game season.

But the other thing I'll say about him and it speaks to his humility, is I always talk about the leader's the person doing the right thing, and we try to do that to empower everyone to lead, and for someone like him that is established as he is relative to his peer group, he creates a lot of space for other people to lead, as well, and I think that's, again, another mark of his humility and his ability to see the bigger picture.

He understands that it doesn't all have to come from him, and even at a young age when he's trying to really establish himself, he creates room for his teammates, both on and off the court.

Q. You talked about stuff being thrown at Shai and him being able to adjust to it. He's a fourth-year guy, but Josh as a rookie, one of the key players on your team, obviously things start being thrown at him once there's a book on him. How did he handle that and grow over the course of the year?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think his growth over the course of the year was impressive. I think the biggest thing that I wasn't sure about, I didn't question it, you just, you never know when you start coaching a guy, is when they start to hit adversity, what that looks like.

His level of fearlessness and aggressiveness in the face of failure is really impressive for a young player, again, that's trying to establish himself. He leans into competition.

There's a lot of times where you see young players, they become timid, they become afraid to fail when they have setbacks, and he just leans right into the competition, he's willing to fail, and I think that bodes well for him moving forward because there's wind at your face in competition no matter who you are, but certainly when you're the youngest team in the league, there's going to be wind at your face.

We embrace that. We think it makes us stronger. We think that's the path we have to take in order to become our best selves, and when you've got a young player like him that's squarely in the middle of what we're doing, that's kind of like leading by doing that right thing, it's an impressive quality.

Q. A lot of optimism among the fan base just about the future of the team. In addition to some of the things you talked about so far, what are the things that give you the most optimism for the future with this group?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think the level of organizational alignment I think is powerful and a competitive advantage, from Mr. Bennett, to our front office, to our coaching staff, to our players, our extended staff, our fans, it just seems like everybody is kind of pulling in the same direction, and there's incredible momentum in that, and that's exciting to be a part of.

There's nothing worse than feeling like you're swimming against a tide, and it doesn't feel like that at all here. That gives me a great deal of optimism.

And then the players that we have in the program right now, many of which are going to carry forward with us, the way that they attack the program, the level of professionalism they bring at a very young age, the level of optimism that they continue to have through the ups and downs of the season, and the fact that they are willing to buy into an identity of being really competitive and doing it together, those give me a lot of optimism and a lot of excitement coaching this particular group of guys.

Q. Going into the season, you all may have had kind of some idea, I think you mentioned the other day that you're better protecting the rim than maybe you anticipated you would be. Were there any things you learned about the style of play that you want moving forward on either end of the floor that were maybe different compared to how you entered the season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Good question. I mean, I think the overall style of play and identity is what it is. We want the whole to be better than the sum of the parts. We want to compete together, we want to play through the paint on both ends of the floor.

I think where you learn is kind of when you go through the season and you see where you're falling short and where you're succeeding and the lessons that can be gleaned from that. I think there's plenty of stuff we can reflect on as we head to the off-season now. But I think overall the most encouraging thing is stylistically on both ends of the floor

we ended the season kind of more actualized than we started it, and that's where we need to be right now with such a young team and guys that are growing and declaring themselves.

Q. Shai's assisted two percentage was 16.8 percent, which was third lowest in the league. 12.9 last year which was the lowest. Is that a number that worries you, is that something you want to see go up?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Just repeat the stat.

Q. Assisted two percentage was 16.8, which was third lowest.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think he leads the league in drives. It's a byproduct of the fact that he's got the ball in his hands a good amount. I do think that all of our players' ability to continue to play off the catch creates space for multiple playmakers and is a way that we want to play.

He's also shot the three over 40 percent over a three-year span. He's at 41 and a half percent on catch and shoot threes over the last three years combined, which is a really high number. And so obviously the more we can get him those shots, the better.

Q. Do you think how hectic last season was for you guys helped you navigate and coach through this season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: With the COVID stuff? Yeah, I think when you've got a group of people like we have, I humbly say that, I have a high degree of confidence in the group of people that we have, and I think when you've got people that are this committed, this professional, this optimistic, this aligned, then when you face adversity it actually is kind of oxygen for you, and I think that was the case with the adversity that we faced the last couple years.

There's never an NBA season that you don't go through adversity, and yet that's not a bad thing. Like I said, we embrace the wind being in our face, we understand that's going to make us stronger, we're not interested in doing average things, and the pathway to that is not easy, and we're willing to lean into that.

So if it's COVID, if it's competitive challenges, we're going to lean into every challenge and use it to generate forward momentum.

Q. Josh is a point guard, Shai is also a point guard, as well. How do you balance that out moving forward?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Josh is a playmaker, Shai is a

playmaker, and you need multiple playmakers to be a really good team. That's a great challenge for us as we continue to evolve.

The team will evolve kind of as it does -- they're both young players. One thing you've got to remember is that you have September is five months away, and a lot of these guys will be different with an NBA off-season, young teams can improve a great deal in the off-season.

So we're not going to box ourselves into an opinion on those two guys or really anybody with this young of a team. We're just going to continue to let things unfold, let the team declare itself, solve problems in real time. The best thing about those two guys is they're high-level competitors, they're high-level workers, and they want to get it right, and they're willing to work to get it right, and that gives us a lot of optimism with them.

Q. The rebuild you talked about extensively, two years of that. Next year, still be rebuilding, but do you anticipate a different level of rebuilding with next year's team?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I try not to have too many expectations, but I will say I'm excited about seeing what our team looks like when we come in the gym in September. I think training camp in particular, just looking at who's on the team, knowing we're going to be layering in more guys, I'm pretty excited about the level of competition, and that level of competition inside your roster is an indicator of having an improving team, and that's a good thing.

It also is competition that prepares you for the rigors of the NBA season. The NBA season is not easy, and the best way to sharpen your blade for that is internally, and I think we're going to have a really competitive roster. We lean into that. That's what good rosters look like.

But in terms of what the outcomes of that are, we're going to let that kind of declare itself.

Q. Is Shai's development, does that expedite the rebuild? It's hard to have a real bad record when Shai plays 75 games.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, he's a really, really, really good player. He's going to be a great player. That's a good thing. And so whatever pace that ends up happening, we're going to focus on the development of, like I said, our environment, our program, our identity, and our individual players, and then let them run and see where that takes us.

The speed of that or the timeline of that is what we're less concerned with. We're more concerned with not skipping steps and we're more concerned with the quality of that and making sure that the soil is fertile moving forward. That's the best thing we can do and that we can control to make sure that as our team continues to get better, both internally guys getting better and as we continue to layer more talent onto the team that that talent, internal and whoever we add, is able to operate closer to their ceiling than their floor, and that's what we can control, that's what we're focused on, and then whatever the outcomes are as a result of that process, we're going to be proud of and live with.

Q. You mentioned creators, guys who can make things happen. Tre Mann emerged over the course of the season, as well, you have a third playmaker in that regard. What did he show you this season in terms of becoming a guy that you have to get on the floor?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, the shot creation was something that we were aware of. How functional that would be, how early we didn't know. That was impressive how quickly he was able to kind of calibrate to the NBA game, the athleticism, the length, especially with how, not far behind, but how much I thought he struggled with that early in training camp. Like I just thought his progress was pretty fast.

Then the other thing is you have to be able to play defense, and there's two ends of the floor, we lean into having a defensive identity. That's been an organizational staple for a long time, and one of the things that we really challenged him on early was being a participant on that end of the floor and bringing a level of aggression and feistiness to compensate for his lack of physicality at this point, his lack of strength, and I thought he leaned into that pretty impressively.

So he cleared some hurdles this year that were pretty impressive, but like all of our guys, huge summer for him, huge opportunity with all the time we have in the summer, and knowing that coming into the gym next year, if we can have a healthy team walking in in September it's going to be really competitive and nothing is going to be handed to anybody and he needs to know that just like the rest of our guys.

Q. Speaking of defense, when you were whole, you were right there with 10, 11, 12 in defensive rating. What were the factors that contributed to that and how do you try to build upon that?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Well, we're 0-0 next year so we can't carry anything over from this year other than the

lessons that we learned, but I would attribute it to competitive players that compete together every night, and they go out there, they try to execute the schemes, they try to execute the game plan, but the biggest ingredient you have on the defensive end of the floor is the level of competitiveness that your team has, and I thought one thing that you can't deny about our team this past season is how consistently we competed. That's I think the thing that we're most proud of.

Q. You talked a lot about the Shai-Josh pairing. They only played together 41 games, so it's a small sample, but you guys didn't shoot it well this season. Maybe it's oversimplifying, but with more shooting around them, how is that going to make things even easier for both of those guys and make them look better together on the floor?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I mean, everybody knows shooting is an essential ingredient to efficient offense. What I'd say is that with shooting it comes down to selection, which some guys need to improve in terms of just getting better looks or in like Tre Mann's case, just more catch and shoots, more clean looks, moving actively to get more clean looks would be good for our offense for a guy like him that's part of his development this summer.

So selection is a part of it, skill is a part of it, we've got five months right now with a growing team, young players, players get better at shooting over time if they work at it, we have that opportunity this summer.

Then you've got to put shooting on the court. We understand that, and we'll do that.

In terms of projecting what that does for us, I would imagine it's going to help any offense if you're shooting the ball better, and we expect to shoot it better moving forward.

Q. Have you decided yet if Josh is going to play in Summer League?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: No. I mean, those are up in the air. We've got some time before that.

Q. I assume this is maybe the first time you've looked at an off-season as being somewhat normal with length and just duration. How do you plan to structure the off-season and I'm sure you learned some lessons the last two years about what you like as far as off-season programs and that sort of thing. What are you going to do with the off-season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, we've got a good off-season rhythm that I think is a nice balance of structure for our

players, especially the younger players that are still habit building and routine building. In terms of developing an approach for them that they can carry with them through their career, and also enough structure for the guys that aren't on-site all summer.

But the first part of the summer is very OKC heavy and OKC based for especially our younger players that are in their first summers.

Summer League is kind of an inflection point where that's kind of the apex of the summer and then the back end of the summer is where we really encourage guys to get on their own turf, we'll go see them quite a bit, they'll be working but in their own pockets of wherever they work. We're encouraging them to try to do that together this summer quite a bit, maybe not every single day but with high quality.

But we're looking forward to just the duration of a five-month off-season. I mean, it's a huge opportunity when you have a team this young. If you've got an aging team the summer is about recovery, but when you've got the youngest team in the league, the summer is about growth, and we have an unbelievable platform and opportunity to grow.

Q. When you talk about the young players being OKC heavy early on, almost all your guys are young. Do you anticipate a vast chunk of the guys to remain?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Good chunk. When I say young, it's probably a good point, like Shai, Lu, those guys have developed an off-season routine and kind of their own bases. They're not as OKC centric at this point.

Bazley, this is going to be his first summer kind of transitioning off-site a little more. We actually encourage that because it promotes autonomy. It forces guys to take the steering wheel of their own career, and we think that's a healthy thing for them to get away, but certainly making sure that we are doing the proper habit building and giving guys proper direction before we do that.

Q. You took the high road on the "Mike Daigneault" stuff. In private did you go to Matty and say, What the hell is going on?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I try to take the high road in private, as well (laughter).

Q. You talked about shooting. You need shooting. Everybody does. You particularly need a lot of shooting. Are you at the point where personnel decisions you focus on that, or are you at the point

where, hey, we just want talent, whatever it looks like?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Sam question, but the one thing I'd say as it relates to personnel, and Sam is very engaging with me on that. We have a very collaborative relationship and very frequent communication as it relates to all things as it relates to both of our jobs.

I've mentioned this before, but I think it's important, the system that we're operating under is a constraining system.

There's a salary cap, there's roster limits, the draft is a constraining system. Everything is presenting constraints all the time as it relates to roster building. Everything is always trying to pull you to mediocrity systematically. That's why the NBA wants parity. That's part of having a salary cap system.

We also have additional constraints because of our market size, and so my personal philosophy is to not be an additional constraint on top of all that in terms of roster building. So if I'm banging the table saying we need A, B or C, it's just more constraints that makes roster building even more of a challenge.

What we try to do is focus on the development of the things that I mentioned before so that whatever we bring into the door is being planted into fertile soil so that that player or that team can operate closer to its ceiling than its floor, and that's really the focus of our coaching staff and really anybody that's in front of our players.

Q. The guys who ended the season with injuries or had surgeries, do you expect them to all be ready to go by the time you guys ramp back up?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: In September? Yeah, I would expect most of them to be ready to go in time to get something out of this summer. Like we're expecting -- they're all making progress, kind of on pace that we would expect, and we're expecting them all to be able to have some part of the summer, and most of the guys are coming into the summer relatively healthy at this point.

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