

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti

End-of-Season Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: Well, first thing is it's really awesome to see everybody in one room here. Just really kind of hitting me right now. We haven't been here in a long time. You guys are very close together, which is different than the past.

Just a couple things before we get started. First, this is the end of the 14th season here, start of the 15th. Super grateful for everyone being here today, and it's a beautiful day outside. As has been the case since the first time I sat in front of the media in Oklahoma City in 2008, I'll sit here until the last question is asked, until you guys start asking me questions like, what books are you reading and things like that, that's when I'm probably going to call it. But I see it as part of my responsibility to be available at the beginning and the end of the season and stand here until you guys don't have anything else to ask.

A big part of that is also the opportunity that I have to speak directly to our fans and our community, and so I put thought into the things that I say because I think it's important for whoever is in this position to take that position, especially here in Oklahoma City.

A couple things to start with. First is I want to thank everybody in basketball operations, just like I do every year, but the last few years have been unique, just like it has been for everybody in this room. I'm so grateful to be able to work alongside with so many wonderful people. It's really a team effort, and I happen to be the representative of all the 60 plus people that we have, and I'm just so -- I've been blessed with all the type of people that I've been able to work with. So I just want to start off with that.

I also want to thank all of our fans and all of our partners. It's been 14 years, and we're heading into 15, and in a place like Oklahoma City, third smallest market in the NBA, it literally takes everybody, and we are so grateful for the people that -- whether you're throwing a hat on, coming to a game, watching on TV, it doesn't matter. Whatever your engagement is with the Thunder, if it's getting you to feel something, we're grateful.

I also think it's fair to mention the fact that even though we



didn't finish the season with COVID top of mind, this was still the most disrupted year we had with COVID. Our medical professionals and all of the testers and the people that quite frankly this was our testing room that you're sitting in right now, so probably a hundred thousand tests or something like that were done in this room this season. I don't know.

There was a point in the year where I think the NBA had 200 cases for players, and it just seems like so long ago, but I don't want to take for granted just because we didn't end that we don't thank the people that were running the tests down to Dallas and doing all the stuff that they have to do and swabbing everybody. Many thanks to those people.

Then I want to thank everybody in the media. It's been 14 years and heading on to 15, and we really value our relationship that we have here with everybody. You guys have been very fair with us. It has me to the point where I look forward to these opportunities to sit in front of you and answer your questions. I hope that's a relationship that continues for a very long time.

I have a couple comments about the year in general. A little bit about the team, some next steps, and as I said before, these are the things that I feel are important for people that follow the team or cover the team, what have you, and then I'll talk about anything you want.

First thing is I think we accomplished a lot this season. Outside of the fact that we got through 82 games, which we haven't been able to do for a little while, we managed the COVID issue, again. We had fans back in the building, albeit with a lot of protocols and procedures. We just are very, very grateful for everybody to kind of work through that with everybody and get to the point where there was none of that at the end of the year, and fingers crossed, hopefully that will not be the case going forward.

We had our first draft of this kind of cycle of the team, and we're really pleased with how that turned out.

At the start of the season when I sat in front of you on a Zoom call, we talked about setting a baseline, getting a baseline for the team. I think we accomplished that.

A couple things that stood out to me. One, I think we have



the bones of a very good defense. We were in the top 10 defensive rating prior to Lu going down and us kind of losing guys left and right. But that doesn't mean we're going to be a good defensive team next year.

We have to kind of go back to the drawing board again, kind of rebuild the defense the same way we did, but I think we demonstrated that we're very capable of being an efficient team on that end of the floor, and that's hard to do with a young team.

The other thing that I thought baseline-wise was important was when we were playing last season without Shai, it looked much different than the way we were playing this season when Shai wasn't on the court. I thought we were much more functional. I thought the style of play was much better.

Obviously there's different players, but it was also the approach and the way that we were able to play both ends of the floor when he wasn't on the floor, whether it be injury or off the floor just for rest.

So I think those were positive. I could go down the roster individually and say, hey, this guy got better, this guy got better, but I feel, and I think most people inside our walls feel like just about every single guy improved because we got an opportunity to look at those guys, put them in situations, challenge them, get them feedback, and then re-challenge them again.

Above the individual development, in my opinion, the most important thing and the thing that I think was exceeding the individual development was the development of the team itself. What do I mean by that? You know, halfway through the year or so, I thought we started to play more efficiently. I think we were playing less patterns, more rhythm. Guys were stepping into shots, not just getting shots. The speed of the decisions was enhanced. We were just playing in a more continuous fashion and quicker minded.

I thought that showed itself at different points in the year, not consistently all the time, but it was, I think, a really good sign for us on both ends of the floor that we were starting to find a bit of a style of play that enhanced the different players that we have, which is a good sign for the future but is going to be something that needs to be culled and crafted and massaged for hopefully a very long time.

Obviously Mark did another really good job. I'm really pleased with the way he's approached things. Also he continues to be a great organizational collaborator. He plugs in with the other disciplines within the operation. We just have a really connected group of people.

When you're trying to do what we're trying to do in Oklahoma City, it takes -- like I said before, it takes everybody. It takes a connected basketball operation. It just takes all hands on deck. That's the most gratifying thing about what we're working toward.

As I said before, when you're in this stage of a team, you're not measuring things -- I shouldn't say you. I'm not measuring things the way we were when we were averaging 50 wins a year for a decade, the measuring was a little bit different because you could see things a little bit more plainly.

I think now to really see progress and growth, you have to really be very observant. It's not going to scream at you on a page of data all the time. You have to be noticing things. You have to be looking at the contextual things.

A couple things that stand out to me in that fashion are a third of our games were decided by five points or less. We were first in the league in comebacks from -- tied for first in the league for comebacks of 15 points or more to come back with wins. A lot of those came at home, but also coming back from 15 on the road with a very young team in the Western Conference is not an easy thing to do.

We were also third in the league in contested shots, which to me is important and an indication of the defense.

Also, all those things are, when you boil them down, they're boiled down to competitiveness. I feel like for the last two years, whoever was in our uniform answered the bell for every practice, shootaround or game.

Now, we don't have it every single night. Sometimes there's scheduling, sometimes -- and this isn't about wins and losses. This is about teeing it up, understanding what it is we're trying to accomplish as a group and competing, not just competing when the wind is at your back but competing when you don't know the outcomes. I'm really proud of that.

Now, we started the season over at the other facility, as everybody recalls. We did it at the -- had training camp at the Blue facility because there's a couple through lines that we want to have organizationally, and one of them is answering that bell professionally on as many occasions as possible. That's going to help us, and we can carry that mentality through going forward.

Another good example of that was, in my opinion, we had Mike Wilks coached the team this year as a head coach, we had Dave Bliss coach a team this year as a head coach. Again, it's a long season, so sometimes people

forget that that even happened, but even in those instances, and those were some pretty good teams we were playing against, I felt like our guys showed up and they answered the call and put ourselves in position to have a chance to beat some of those teams, Milwaukee and I think Phoenix might have been the other one.

As I said, these are the things that you have to observe and notice. Now, a lot of times success is defined in hindsight in our world currently, not just sports but in general. People like to look back and point out things. We're always on the lookout for the moments where we think those things are going to be remembered in the course of time. So we talk about those internally as catalyst moments. Who are the catalysts, what are the catalyst moments. Some of those are coming from straight up hard work and competing.

Now, next season I think we have to maintain that to see if we can do that three years in a row, to have the logo mean something for the guys on the floor, which I believe it does, but we've got to be more physical. Our team has to be more physical next season.

That's, again, a tall order for a young team in the West, a lot of nights running uphill at different points in time.

But that doesn't mean everybody has to turn into Lu or Derrick Favors. Everybody can be physical in their own right, but you can't play meaningful games or games of consequence if you're not playing physical and you're not competing. That's something we talked about with the team before they left on exit day was these are the things that good teams have to do, and we best get to start doing them early because anyone that's watching high-level games, whether in the postseason or the regular season, those games are physical.

While we're scratching and clawing as a team for all the margins we can get to establish ourselves, this iteration of the Thunder in the NBA and in the West, we're going to have to scratch and claw on competing, being physical and being a close-knit team that can win games when it matters.

I think we have a lot of that stuff. It makes me think about a quote that I read a long time ago from Albert Einstein which says that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts. That to me is what this team and the things you need to look at is all about.

For us, I think a lot of the stuff that really counts in the phase that we're in, you can't put a number on. You can't put a label on. It's stuff you have to really watch every

game and every minute and watch the growth, the fallback, the failure, the learning, and coming back and doing it again.

Everyone has to have a good summer. That's been well communicated. I'm very confident our guys will have 150 days now, which is amazing when you think about what it was we were working with the last two years, but 150 days for some of the guys that we have in our uniform that are hungry and hand selected because of their approach to working. I want to see what happens when they come back.

With that said, I'm confident they're going to work because if they don't, they're going to get left behind, and they understand that. There's more competition on the team. There will be more players coming in.

We did get a lot of guys experience, which is critical for us as we have to make decisions on people. But they're going to have good summers.

Now, we also talk internally about pulling all the time from our community and the aspirational vision that helped reestablish Oklahoma and the history of Oklahoma, and one of the things we talk about is the state motto. I'm sure everybody in here is an expert on the state motto. But for those of you that aren't aware of it or for those of you watching outside of Oklahoma, "Labor omnia vincit," I brushed up on my Latin pronunciation to make sure, but we've had that in place and talked about that since 2008, but what that means is hard work conquers all.

If you go back and look at the translation in Latin, it's slow work conquers all because it comes from a poem by a Greek philosopher named Virgil, who I didn't know a lot about, but that's the mentality of the team. Like we have a lot of hard work in front of us. We have to grind in and do it. That's what the state is about. That's what the history of the community is about. That's what the basketball team here is about.

I think our guys are going to be ready and willing, and we're going to see the fruits of that when they come back.

Another aspect that I think is important, as I said, we've had one draft, we're heading into our second draft as we continue to reposition and rebuild the team. It also allows us to build some continuity, which is really in my opinion very, very important in any sport. It's kind of very tied to the Einstein quote. It's the stuff you can't see.

A lot of times I think people think sports is all about transactions now, but really the molding and shaping of teams is happening in front of your eyes, and it's really --



it's like watching grass grow. Continuity is critical to that.

Now, the way the system is set up now, and I mean the league system, it's really meant to fracture continuity. It's shorter contracts, player movement all over the place. The way you can overcome that is if you have bottomless financial resources you can kind of blow through all those rules, but otherwise it's layering on younger players to try to build that out.

We've now got some guys that have played four years together, three years together. We'll add another group. That continuity is really, really important for us to continue to kind of replenish the group and let guys learn each other, play with each other, and through that competition you'll start to identify the needs that we'll need to fill over time.

Health-wise I want to give a report on that. We should have everybody ready to go for training camp. It's the second time in two years that we've had some bad luck in the second half of the season with injuries. We had three surgeries this year, trying to avoid a couple more, which we were able to.

If you go back and look at what I said at the end of 2020 and the beginning of this season even, it's rather predictable that the league is going to have a lot of injuries this season, and if you look across the league, the people that have the most injuries are the highest usage players because stars have missed more games this season than I think almost ever before, and then young players, because young players don't have the training body to play these type of seasons without a real off-season.

The two off-seasons combined, I think it's really predictable that you're going to have this across the league, and we got hit by it, as well.

There's one thing I feel like I could have done a better job with on this particular issue, and that is getting the hardship players here sooner. When we started getting the guys going down as they were, we thought and I thought we would get a few of these guys back sooner or some at all, and we ended up not getting them. I held up on bringing the hardship guys in, and as a result we started to really tax the back end of the roster and they start to redline because Poku, Tre, Theo and some others were now 65, 70 percent more on top of what they were playing before, and if we had had a couple extra bodies around earlier, I think it would have made it easier.

Hadn't seen a situation quite like that since I want to say 2014 when we had that whole situation and we brought some guys in. I think that's how we got Ish Smith. But that

could have been done a little bit better.

As we head into next season, we're going to let the season unfold just like we have every season we've been here. We don't walk into the season with a preconceived notion of what the year is going to be. Luckily for us in 2020 everybody picked us to win games or something like that. We finished on the 52-game pace. We were able to make a decision halfway through the year around the trade deadline as to how we wanted to manage the second half. We did that again last year and the year before, where we come into the year, let everybody set their predictions.

I think there's probably some people that picked us to win 15 games or 16 games again. Luckily we don't listen to them, and we played the year out.

Now, if we get to a situation where we're out of the ability to play games of consequence or meaningful games, then we've shifted to development, which is I think the responsible thing to do for any organization, and every organization does that.

But we don't walk into the season eyeing how the season is going to go because the one thing you know is whatever your expectations are, that's what it won't be, because there's only one way for you to meet your expectation, and there's about 2 billion ways for it not to go that way.

So we'll do the same thing next year; see where we are, compete, continue to focus on how we're working, not what we're trying to accomplish, and play it from there.

I would say that we're closer to being the team we want to be this season than we were last season, but we're still really far away from ultimately getting to a level that we want to be at. But I definitely think we're in a better position than we were one year ago. The way we're going about things, my hope is we're able to say that for the foreseeable future, that each season is a build and can be built upon and that we're in a position to absorb some bad luck or a disappointing year or a regression in any way and not feel like we've put all our eggs in one basket.

I think that's one of the reasons why we were good for so long in the past.

I know there are some people that get concerned at times when I speak to season ticket holders and stuff like that. I'm out there before games, and a lot of times some of those people on the floor will say I hope you guys are going to stay the course, don't deviate from what you're doing. We really want to have a good sustainable team. I promise you that's not going to be a problem.

We understand what we're trying to do. We have the context of history to do that in terms of how long it takes to get back to the Playoffs or consecutive playoff appearances. Everybody can do the math.

We've had one draft, we're going on another. We've got a group of really motivated guys that are hungry and willing to work, and we're really excited about that.

Trying to fix things quickly takes a very long time. So we're going to try to avoid making it longer by trying to make it shorter.

But the thing I would say is I'm really confident that we're going to be successful. Internally we talk a lot about the difference between being a clock watcher and a pace setter, and people that watch the clock to me are not people that are ultimately extremely successful in whatever they're trying to accomplish.

You can't have one eye on the clock and one eye on the destination. We need to have two eyes on the path for us to be successful. We'll let other people watch the clock. To me watching the clock is an indication that you don't think you can do it. Watching the clock is how much longer do I have to stay on this treadmill, how much longer -- we want to be the person that puts a towel over the treadmill and we can just keep going, because we believe in a certain set of principles that are going to allow that to happen over time.

We draw a lot on our city, and I'm going to just talk about that briefly. COVID disrupted a lot of things in the NBA. I would say if you polled 30 teams, everyone would have a different thing that they were disrupted by. Most people would say player availability or they would say wins and losses, whatever it might be. In my opinion COVID disrupted more than anything for us community engagement. We haven't been able to be out in the way that we know how to and want to because of the policies.

When I talk to the guys at the end of the season, one of the things I said to them was until you have the opportunity to have a full year with the Thunder where you're engaging in high-contact situations with senior centers and Book Bus and kids and holiday shopping sprees, you haven't had a 360-degree experience as a Thunder player. So we're really looking forward to that.

I think that really is an important part to being a player for this organization, and we're looking forward to that, fingers crossed, being able to do more of that next season, because that's a huge part of who we are.

It did feel like we were missing a little bit even when we got

back without the testing and the masks and everything.

We have a group of die-hard fans that we really appreciate, and they love the guys that we have. One of the reasons why is they're extremely relatable. They're very, very fun, and they're passionate about playing for the Thunder.

The thing I say to those people is put your arms around these guys because they want to be the team that is the catalyst to the breakthrough at some point. Now, I don't know how many guys are going to be here when that happens. Neither do they. They're competing for an opportunity to be here.

But these guys like playing in Oklahoma City. They want to be part of that team that people look back on and say, hey, that was a moment that helped us get to where we want to go.

As I said, none of us know when. We'll know when it happens. But it may not be in the near future. We have no idea. We have to let that play out.

It reminds me of a bit of a time I had with Ron Norick, who's a former mayor here. We traded for PG, and it was right after the trade because I knew either PG was going to leave after the year or we were going to re-sign him and there would be so much financial pressure on the organization that we weren't going to be able to sustain that very long.

So I called Ron and had him come over to our offices and we talked all about maps, and I wanted to know what his mindset was about maps. How could you take something that you could see but not everybody else could?

The thing he really impressed upon me. He was amazing, gave me so much time. You can't use time as part of the equation because the more you're focused on time, the less the quality is there, and you will sacrifice your opportunity and upside for the job at hand. So I think about if Ron had been a clock watcher and not a pace setter, we'd have 75 percent of the city we have today. We'd still have 50 percent of the city that we have today. We'd still be trying to build on top of that.

But I think his ability to see that -- and he said they put the canal in and that was a massive celebration because it was a sign of something.

But he really impressed upon me that it was more the theory of the pace setter/clock watcher. It wasn't in those words, but he was a big inspiration, and obviously we staved off needing to do that to be in this phase when PG re-signed, but we knew that was coming. So we had

started to think about what are the tenets we'll need to abide by whenever this day comes.

We're underdogs at the moment. Our players are underdogs at the moment. They know that. But to me that's the beauty of Oklahoma. They don't -- people here don't expect to be handed things. They don't expect to have the yellow brick road laid out for them. I think people here expect to work for what they get. I think they expect to do it together, unified. I think that "Labor omnia vincit," I think that matters here, and I think specifically to here. Maybe not all 29 teams, but here I think it does matter. I think the guys in our locker room believe that.

Wrapping up, and then we'll get to every question you want, number one, I think we had a productive year. We're further ahead than we were a year ago.

Two, we're going to our second draft. Generally in the Western Conference these things take a while. That's not to say that there's an average and then you can beat the average. You can also go longer than the average. We're not looking at that. That's for other people to study. We're looking at what do we have to do next.

Third, we have confidence that we're going to be successful. But the only way we're going to be successful is if we show humility in the face of what it is we're trying to accomplish, we keep our head down and focus on not what we're going to do but how we need to do it, and then we need to stick together, because it's going to get rougher, there's going to be difficult times, and there's going to be great times.

So when I drive to work, occasionally I let my mind wander, and I think about what's it going to be like the next time there's postseason basketball in Oklahoma City. What's it going to look like? What's it going to feel like? What's it going to smell like? What is it going to be like?

I don't know when that's going to happen. I can't tell you. I really can't. I have no idea. But I can tell you that everyone here is going to be driving to the arena at some point going to a playoff game or a game of consequence, and the people that have walked the path with everybody here are going to have a mind/body/soul experience as a result of that, and that's what sports is about in a small market. That's what we're trying to accomplish as an organization.

There's a core group of people in my opinion that I saw the other night that I know are going to have the same mind/body/soul experience when it does happen, whenever that is, and those are the people when they introduce the Thunder legacy players on the balcony, there

was I don't know how many fans but they shot up out of their seats and gave those guys standing ovations. Those are people that bleed blue. Those are people that bleed blue. Those are the people that have a chance to really make it different here.

Their pride in what it is that those guys represented was just -- really took me back, to be honest with you, and they're going to have an incredible feeling once we get to that spot, because they're going to have been there 360 like everybody else.

We're running our own race. We're not watching the clock. We know our time is going to come. But we're not -- we can't predict when that's going to be. But we're up for the challenge here.

I appreciate everybody's patience letting me get through that. I'm speaking to our fans as much as I am to everyone in the media here, and now I will be here until you guys run out of questions.

Q. In terms of this particular roster, there's some needs you have --

SAM PRESTI: We don't have enough time --

Q. You said you were going to stay as long as we want.

SAM PRESTI: But if we got into needs it would be a little while.

Q. How do you balance that out with immediate needs and just long-term development? The draft or picking up players, whatever it is, how much do you prioritize those two things?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a great question. So the way I would answer that is, number one, the thing that reveals some of your needs are, number one, competition, playing in games, knowing what you have. That's the baseline I was talking about. I think you always need to be understanding where your baseline is.

One of the things that I think about is when we had our first team here that was pretty good. So Jeff Green was playing the 4. We were a 50-win team. We were pretty good. But every time we played Memphis, Denver, LA, we would get thrown around like a doll, like a rag doll.

By playing those games and going into those situations, it became clear to us, okay, this is an issue. Now, if we just looked at the team and tried to predict, okay, we need this, well, we're forecasting a need before we even know what it

is we're trying to fix. So we could have found somebody, but I don't know that the person we would have gotten would have been able to do what Kendrick Perkins did for us which got us to four out of six Western Conference Finals or something like that.

You have to play the games. You are going to have to run up against some ceilings. But if you are just so hell-bent on filling something, I think you really run the risk of not understanding what you're willing to go for. So you need to buy a shirt. You just buy the first one off the rack. At the time you need a small, but what if the team grows to the point where it needs a large and you're stuck at a small? I wouldn't make it a priority as to what you need today because there's a lot of things. Once you have one thing you're going to need another thing. There's never a perfect team. Even the best teams you can think of are not perfect.

But we need to make sure that these other things I talked about, mentality, physicality, the development of the guys, because the other thing about that question is the team is changing. So Shai, Josh, like to think that we know today exactly what they need would be pretty pretentious. So they're going to evolve, as well.

We do the best we can, but we are going to be learning along the way and say, oh, okay, to play in high-level games this is what we need. We're not just trying to figure out how to win two more games next year. We could do that, but that solution doesn't necessarily mean it's the best long-term solution for the team.

Q. You look long-term but you have these sort of short-term things that are coming up over the next couple months, the second draft of this cycle as you mentioned, free agency potential, Dort and Bazley extensions. Is there anything else in this window that's really at the fore of your mind right now?

SAM PRESTI: Well, the stuff we talked about earlier, obviously the stuff that can't be counted. But that stuff is like ground cover compared to the things that -- when you're at the stage where we are, like you said, going into our second draft, we reposition the team financially on and off the floor, but the thing that really shapes everything in every sport is what are the rules that are governing the CBA essentially. The CBA, and obviously that could change in 2023, revenue sharing is tied to that, digital media deal could be a factor. Those are things that -- they really drive so much of the league. It's also stuff that if I was a fan I wouldn't be really focused on or interested in that, and I would advise people if you want to enjoy the NBA, don't focus on that.

But it's just like playing style. The NBA wanted more freedom of movement, higher scores and more scoring, so what did they do? They changed the rules. The way you get to your ultimate outcome is what are the principles and what are the rules. Those things change the system, and we're all working within the system.

Obviously we're paying very, very close attention based on past experience as to what that's going to look like going forward, especially in the stage of where we are as a team.

Those things play a huge role. You've got these small team issues, like you mentioned -- not to say they're small, but compared to the umbrella we're working under systematically, those are the things that really shape the future of the NBA. So waiting to see what kind of league do we want and what are the principles that we're using in order to shape that and get that outcome, and then we can play from that knowing kind of what the framework is.

Q. You talked about building continuity, but how tough is that, especially judging, when most of your key players were on and off the court for much of the season?

SAM PRESTI: Well, continuity comes I think in a couple different ways. We had most of those guys for a lot of time. The way we ended the season versus the way that it went for the body of it, I thought we were in a pretty good spot.

But continuity also comes in summers. It comes in training camp. It comes in the fall. It comes from just reps in the same room together and guys getting to know each other and guys building relationships and going through different adversities together.

Lu and Shai have played together for a while now, Baze and those guys have played together for a while. Josh has one year with that group, and Ty Jerome. That stuff matters in sports because, as I said before, the way the league is designed, it's really every -- you have to basically -- when I was a kid I had all these posters on my wall, tons of them, and in today's day and age I couldn't keep them up because I'd have to change -- I'd need a new poster all the time because people are changing teams all the time.

That's a challenge in pro sports when things like eye contact or just anticipation -- you can see the way some of these teams play that have that level of continuity. It gives you an advantage. We're in the very early stages of trying to build some of that. But yeah, there's going to be a lot of players in and out for us because we have a lot of tools to work with.

So we have to do the best we can to get a look at as many guys as possible so we can make some decisions on people.

Q. Your guys were in here last week for exit interviews. I went back and looked at transcripts, and eight guys used the word "fun" a total of like 18 times, and these were a lot of your mainstay guys when they were talking about the year. A lot of people on the outside would have said that's probably not a word you're going to hear a lot, and I'm sure that ties back into what you're building within the walls here, but were there moments throughout the year that stand out for you that let you know the guys had bought into the point that they were feeling like hey, this is something I'm enjoying and I'm bought into?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, I'd like to think that if you go back and look at the transcripts for the last 14 years for the most part -- now, we may have ended some seasons disappointed because of outcomes, but I always felt like we've had a good room like that for the most part. This team in particular, specific examples, the one thing I really go back to -- this is just something from last year, but I don't know if you guys remember when Mark had the guys in Detroit write up on the board why they played.

I think those things are happening, and for those of you that aren't aware, the stuff that was on the board was I play for the logo, I play for my family, I play for my child, I play for my teammates, I play for the city, I play for all the players that have come before me. That was a pretty inspiring exercise, and we're able to see that on a pretty regular basis with this particular group of guys. I'm not saying that's going to be the case forever, but that's why I was saying, if you can't get behind this particular group of guys, to me they're very emblematic of what we all say we want from sports. Do know what I mean? I love being around them.

I've heard people use the word positive, fun. I don't know that I would go with like positive, because I wouldn't say where it's like a positive thing. I think it's optimistic, and I think there's a difference.

I remember speaking to Scotty Brooks early in our days when we were 3-29, and you couldn't be positive because I think you'd be like somewhat like detached from reality. But you could be optimistic.

I think that's probably more us, which is like look, we're not where we want to be. This is in 2008. We're certainly not where we want to be. But like we had two good defensive rotations tonight. That means that tomorrow we might be able to have three. Then maybe we could be in the game

at a half.

Like optimism to me is more about saying like we can get this done. We're not where we want to be. But let's look for signs here.

I think there were examples this season of just the way the guys supported each other, especially guys that were competing for minutes that were really supportive of one another on a young team. To me that was very impressive.

There's a maturity amongst this particular group of guys that I find refreshing in that way. They want to know and they're really interested and a lot of them have a pretty good instinct on what makes a team work. How does a team function? Again, it's the Einstein stuff I'm talking about. I think we can get so dragged into quantifying everything and numbers, and at the end of the day there are certain things that make teams work, and I think some of the guys have good instincts on that.

Q. Shai talked about Lu is tough. Lu used the playoff word and talked about the number of close games that you lost and felt experienced to win those games next year. Is that something you want to hear? I think the average fan is saying you had 24 wins this year, Playoffs maybe not attainable but they want to see improvement. Is that something you think is possible?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I wouldn't expect -- we wouldn't want and we wouldn't look for players that would not give you that answer. They're hungry. They want to compete. Lu and Shai are two seasons removed from a Game 7 where we went down to literally the last second. Baze, as well. Yeah, I mean, I totally understand that.

The difference I think is that there's no -- you don't increase your odds because you want it. You can want something really bad. We all would like to have things. You have to go to how you're going to do that.

As I said before, no one is going to hand anything to our team in the West. We have to -- our mindset creates our reality, and the mindset is we have to show up and we have to put the work in, we have to rep it out, we have to learn from our experiences.

I think Mark has done an unbelievable job of helping tapping into like how the guys learn from those experiences. Yeah, if the team declares itself and we are capable of that, yeah, of course, that's where we want to be ultimately, but you're not going to get there just because you say you want it. That starts in the summertime, that starts in the off-season, and then when you get together in

camp, and then you're going to have to manage all the adversities that come in a season.

I'm happy that's where our head is, but I'm more interested in like how are we doing that. That's one of the things that we talk a lot about with the guys is like in advance, what are the things we're working by, what are the principles that we're working by that are going to ladder up to success at some point. We don't talk about when, because we don't really control that.

If that happens quicker than a lot of people expect, great. Then we've got to figure out how to stay there. But I'm happy that Lu is thinking like that. We come into every season with the same mentality.

Q. Your impact on this community basketball-wise specifically and just overall is just stunning, so congratulations for that. The people I talk to on the street, they want to talk about next year, winning, the rebuild, and most every one of them says in Sam we trust. Do you know that you're that important to them? And secondly, when do you reach a point where you could go anywhere you wanted to go and have this job or something similar where you say, man, I love this, but it's on to the next venture? Do you see the fans' concern for that?

SAM PRESTI: Well, the first thing I'd say, when you're asking that question, what was running through my mind was the team. Like when you're saying -- I was thinking you were saying the team is so important to the community, the team is so -- I'm just, like I said before, a representative of that, of the logo, as I would say everyone that works for the organization is.

I do think the team is important to the community. Myself, I don't really think about it in those contexts. I think that -- I think this is a great place. I think that the Thunder is really, really critical to so many different aspects of Oklahoma City, and I hope it stays that way.

As far as myself individually, I don't really think like that. Like I've never been one that thinks about -- I just kind of focus, like this is where I am, this is what I need to do. I know I'm not going to be the last general manager for the Thunder because there's an end to everything, but I'm not thinking about that right now. I am laser focused on how do we make sure that the team is positioned and set up as great as it can be. I love being a part of that. I love being a part of that.

But my mind doesn't go to like all the different -- all that stuff.

Q. You're entering the lottery with the fourth best odds, also the second lottery pick from the Clippers. How do you assess your position heading into the lottery and also the differences of finishing fourth versus trying to get into that bottom three or falling to fifth?

SAM PRESTI: Well, the best way to look at the lottery in my opinion is to see it exactly for what it is, which is just -- it's a game of chance. You have absolutely no control over it.

Last year we got pretty bad outcome in terms of the outcome of the drawing, but I don't think we got a bad outcome from the night because I think Josh Giddey is a good player. I think he's done a really -- I think he's exceeded most people's expectations given his age. He's younger than a lot of the guys who are going to be picked this year in the lottery.

I think the problem you run into in these jobs is assigning yourself credit for when things are successful that you don't have a lot of control over, and then also assigning yourself blame for things that you don't have a lot of control over.

The whole league is shaped in my opinion on a couple nights: Draft lottery night, the fortunes of a lot of teams change. Memphis goes from 8 to 2. That's a massive change. That's a seismic change. Then July 1 or July 4 when the bigger name free agents then have freedom to go to the places they want to go. That really changes the balance. One changes the short-term balance, one changes the long-term balance. But we don't really have a lot of control over that.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. A lot of people talk about an event happens and then there's a reaction to the event. I would change it -- so then I modify that in my mind so event happens and then it's more about a response than it is about a reaction because if you're reacting, who knows what that is.

The next phase or the thing that I'm really trying to think more about is the event happens, then there's like an assessment, and then there's a response. I think after the lottery happens we sit down and we assess exactly where we are and then we figure out how to play the ball from there. But we're not owed anything, and it's a game of chance.

For us it's a much bigger night than maybe for other teams that have different avenues to their team building.

But we'll work through it no matter what happens. I think we showed that last year. But you can't get tied to the --

you have to understand how much luck plays a role in all the teams that are in the postseason right now, they're all the beneficiary of some kind of luck, and the Thunder's 10-, 12-year run that we had, there was a lot of luck in there. Now, some of it was bad, a lot of it was good, and what we've tried to do is make that last as long as possible when you get something good that happens.

Q. Speaking of the draft, Josh Giddey was talking about how he's going to be tuned in and he said that you guys have a lot of honest conversation with each other. Do you guys talk about the possibilities ever or his preferences as a creator and how that can fall into it?

SAM PRESTI: I think stylistically that's an ongoing conversation that Mark has with everybody, just in terms of -- like I think any modern coach is talking to the players about what they like, how that works. Your ultimate job is to put them in positions to be successful and give them confidence. At the end of the day, like I said, less patterns, more rhythm.

But like are we running names past those guys? I mean, not necessarily, no. That's not because we don't care what they think, but I think we know -- like I think they trust us that we know what it is that we're looking for, because it's an ongoing conversation.

The conversations that we have with those guys, because I know that that was referenced a lot in the last media session, and I figured someone would ask about it, so the transparency is not like -- we're not breaking out a PowerPoint presentation for everybody. What we're really talking about is like what are the principles that we want to work by, and getting a shared understanding and shared buy-in of like, okay, so what do we want out of this, what do you want out of this, how do we make that work. Because once you start to have success, it's really hard to start to claim those things.

When I got hired, I had an interview with Clay. It was 2007. I flew from Orlando to Dallas. I met him in Dallas. I spent a large part of my interview with him talking to him about the difference between a winning culture and a culture where you can win.

The difference is a winning culture, the environment is shaped by the success, by the winning. Well, that's a residue of on-court success. Well, that also means that it's a byproduct. So you're kind of a weather vane to whatever is happening on the court, versus a culture where you can win.

To me if you don't start talking about those things early

before you have success, then I don't think you really have a grounding or an anchor of what you stand for and what you're about, and winning can really mess with that.

With those guys specifically, like we're trying to have those conversations on the front end about the environment, and I thought to Jenny's question earlier, I think one of the reasons the guys are optimistic is we're not operating tied to the outcomes, because when we get good, and we will get good, we don't want to be tied to those, either, because that's going to blind you, as well. We need to have those conversations early and often so that everybody understands, this is what we're trying to do. This is how we're trying to work.

It's not me, it's not Mark, it's not Shai, it's not Ty Jerome, it's a shared set of values that we want to have in place so that we know that the environment is coming not from the standings but coming from us and whoever is in these roles, be it mine, Mark's or the players'.

I think that's really important, and that's a bit of -- that's the transparency of it and being on the front end of that, because it gets hard. The NBA is 82 games. The scrutiny is crazy. These are young people who spend a lot of time on their phones, so you're going to get blitzed with a lot of different things and emotions so let's talk about that stuff early and let's create an environment where we ultimately can win, not just wait to talk about our culture when we're winning.

Q. You've talked a lot about measure quite a bit here. Mark, I want to talk about him and how he's evolved over the course of the last year. Hard to measure that, but for the average fan when you're looking at the standings, how has he evolved?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think the benefit that I have is I've known him for like almost a decade, but I'm still seeing him develop and grow because he, like a player that we have, is being put into different situations all the time. I think that was one of the best things about his experience as a G-League coach is that's a really ever-changing environment.

I just think the cadence of the season, the confidence he's giving the guys, I think the commitment to a style of play, that we might come up on the short end of a game because we're working really hard to not take the bait and like sacrifice our commitment to that style of play or holding someone accountable to that style of play that might not have the best influence on the outcome of the game, but it's going to really carry forward, because if you start making those concessions now, you can't get those back.

So I really respect that, especially for a young coach. I think he's committed to the right stuff on that stuff, and the style of play thing has really made a big difference, I think, in the team.

We need to massage that and cultivate that because that's a work in progress. It's going to get better, it's going to stall. It's very complicated.

Q. You mentioned how the end of next season could look like the end of this season or even last season once you guys get past the point where you're not playing games of consequence. I'm just curious in the second half of this season, injuries certainly contributed to this, but you continually pared down the roster until it got to the end where it was a bunch of new guys on two-way contracts and two-way guys. When was that decision made and at what point do you decide, okay, we're going to go forward with these six guys or whatever?

SAM PRESTI: Well, there's kind of two things. One -- what was the question again? That was a long question.

Q. Basically how did you reach the decision of, okay, Shai is out with an injury, Josh is out with an injury, we're going to play guys like Poku, Maledon, Jerry, Wiggins, but then they sit out, they're available, but --

SAM PRESTI: Gotcha. So no different than we have in the past. Similar to situations we've had, like I'll use 2020, when we weren't in that situation of when we had a game of consequence to play, and we were like, okay, this is what our goals are, this is what we're trying to accomplish.

Like I said in the beginning, the hardship -- I have to take some responsibility for the fact I did not have the hardship players here early enough and then we started to redline some of those other guys.

It's four games or -- I don't know how many games, four games out of 82. We had some of those guys who we felt should have got called up during the year. In fact we had Melvin Frazier coming up during COVID, and he had COVID, and Zavier Simpson, too. So those are two guys that -- and for a guy that's in the G-League, to be on the cusp of signing that contract and then not be able to get that opportunity, we told ourselves, okay, we've got to see if we can help that situation.

But I would have liked to have gotten to that sooner, quite frankly, and we didn't, and then we got in a situation where we're four games left in the season, and we decided to give all the minutes to those guys. That's kind of the way it was for us.

Q. But isn't that -- certainly has something to do with the lottery standings and giving yourself the best chance to position yourself for the lottery?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I would say probably for us it's we want to look at those guys, we want to see them out on the floor. They're guys that, again, if you look across the league, everybody is playing younger players. It's like September -- these expanded rosters in September, that's what you're looking at the end of the season. I've been in the league 20 years. It hasn't been 19 out of 20. The end of the season, once the incentives are completely split, you're seeing that for 20 years.

Now, here -- we've been here for 14 years. It's been two years that our incentives have been different, and we've leaned into development hard. But we're doing that because we want to see those players, we want to get to that point. We also don't want anyone getting injured so that we can't start the next season healthy, because like I said before, the margin for error is pretty small.

I think we threaded that the best that we could.

Q. The Thunder have unfairly been called the black eye of the NBA because of their, quote-unquote, tanking, and it's brought to question when it'll end. I know you can't take shortcuts, I know things change over time, you just said you can't use time in the equation, but is there a date that you yourself envision, like I said, when you say to yourself, if everything goes well I want the Thunder to be in playoff contention consistently by X year?

SAM PRESTI: Well, the first thing I would say we have a rebuilding team now. Other people can -- they like to name things because they have certain opinions that they are trying to -- it's performance art. That's what social media has become is performance art. We're not going to get caught up in that.

Not everybody should be a publisher at the end of the day. No offense, but -- and that's not directed to anybody in here specifically.

But I do think there's a difference between being opinionated and being informed. I'd rather be informed than opinionated. The information is we've gone -- we went 12 years and we put everything we had into that. Like everything. We taxed the team, no pun intended, to the point where, like, financially the third smallest market in the NBA shouldn't be asked to go to that level in order to compete. I think that's one of the prevailing issues that the league is going to have to solve for, especially with the

level of new ownership that's entered the equation and where the trending is financially in terms of just the disparity in the payrolls.

But yeah, we're going to set our own pace. We're not going to watch the clock, like I said earlier.

Rebuilding in the West, go look at history. Go study how many drafts it takes. Find your team, find the one that you think is successful and then work back from there. How many years does it take to get to one playoff appearance in the West? How many years does it take to get to two, back to back? That's a lot different.

If you're watching the clock all the time, you're going to make it -- you're actually going to end up making it longer. Like I said, to try to fix things quickly takes a very long time. We're entering our second draft.

In context, it's like, I don't even know what to say to that. Do you know what I mean? I understand the question, but for us we're like, okay, we're -- that doesn't change our point of view on what we're trying to accomplish.

Q. You talked about wanting to make an arrival, not an appearance in the playoffs. You didn't have good lottery luck last year. Luckily it was a deep draft; Josh was there. If you don't have lottery luck this year, what does the path look like to getting to the Playoffs consistently?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, well, I think one, no matter what, the path is a sustainable, like, postseason team in the Western Conference is -- it looks like a scene from Indiana Jones, right? You're walking in and you see everybody that tried to do it around you and tried to do it faster and shortcut everything, and you don't want to be in that situation.

But it all comes down to your current team in my opinion. And so if the guys we have are really good and come together as a team, like that's going to move the needle. But I think if you artificially try to accelerate something that needs to happen organically, I think that's where you run into -- that's where you can get yourself into big problems in my opinion.

So I think the team has to declare itself, and the team itself is going to tell us that. I thought the Jeff Green example I used with Barry is a good one. The team kind of declared itself and said, hey, we're here; to get to the next thing, we've got to be here.

As I've said, luck favors the persistent. So rather than worrying about what if this doesn't happen or what if that doesn't happen, we don't control those things. We are

focused on, okay, what do you have to do to play winning basketball, how can you unwind that to do that in Oklahoma City and try to do it the right way.

But the lottery, I'm not going to tell you it's not a big deal, but I am going to tell you that we have no control over it and then we'll assess the situation after the fact, figure out what the best thing to do is, but the team will move forward more next season in my opinion based on the guys that are on the current roster and then improving more than what happens in the lottery.

I think that's a positive thing. I think that's a positive thing. That's the only way you can approach it.

Q. To that point, how much does the improvement Shai has made, the expected improvement guys like Josh and Tre Mann will make next year, whatever you could plan out, their play sort of dictates the speed at which this will go and you've talked about wanting to avoid getting to the middle perhaps faster. I know it's a good problem to have, but how do you balance those two things, their improvement versus positioning yourself for say the 2023 lottery?

SAM PRESTI: Well, that's the -- the team itself -- you're answering your own question. The team is the thing that's going to drive you forward. It's the improvement of the current players.

Now, we need some guys to come back better shooters, but I don't think that's a huge expectation for younger players that have all summer to work and are highly driven and like that's generally what happens, guys get better. We're going to need some steps to be taken for that to happen.

But yeah, the NBA is pulling the best teams to the middle and they're pulling the worst teams to the middle. That's how it's designed.

If you look at the top of the league in five-year increments, the teams that are at the top of the league generally speaking, one maybe two will still be there in five years. The teams at the bottom, they're not going to be the bottom, either, because they'll get pulled to the middle, as well.

That's the way the system is supposed to work. That's the way it's supposed to work. We want to be in a position where we feel like if we get to that level, or hopefully we will get to that level, it's on our way towards something greater. But if the team gets there rapidly, we'd be way ahead of schedule comparatively to the history of the rest of the league, especially without any good fortune or

something like that.

It's not something like we can control. It's more we want the players to get better, they want to get better, and we have to see where that takes us.

Q. Speaking of the draft, just especially given how COVID affected the last year's draft, couple years' draft, what's this experience been like for you getting to know the players in this draft, especially with potentially the two lottery picks --

SAM PRESTI: I mean, it's been better. The last couple years was not easy. The only downside is like the end of last season you'd pull up right next to the arena, get in and walk in and there was nobody else in the building, so it was like a dress rehearsal. It was awesome.

But I definitely like being in the college gyms and everywhere. We've got a great group of scouts that they're grinding it all the time, and they care so much about the team and getting the right people.

I feel like we're in a good spot. Now, I will say this: The postseason workout section, which I really say is the agent -- it's like the agent season, has taken on a much greater meaning than it used to have, because I have to credit the agents; they have really become much more sophisticated in their setups for the players. So the players are really getting -- they're taking another leap.

If you take a 19-year-old player, 20-year-old player, 21-year-old player, and you really -- that hasn't really understood how to train and you put him in one place with the right resources and the right mindset and a real incentive, like hey, this could change your life, these next two months, you see massive gains. Just like if you looked at Tre Mann at the beginning of the season and you looked at Tre Mann at the end of the season, different player. That's still happening with 80 percent, 85 percent of our roster. Bazley looked different at the end of the year, Poku, everybody. So that's happening with these draft players, as well.

It used to be a little bit different where it was a little bit time stamped, things didn't change a whole lot. Now you're seeing guys really move around, and a big part of it is they make great gains in these agent kind of camps that they're in, and then they do the workouts. The difference is that they don't do as many workouts. But I do think that is a part that's grown in importance.

So we're I think good up until now, but there's a whole 'nother almost season of the draft prep that's coming up that didn't used to always be there. I'd say the last three

years it's gotten much better.

Q. Being as distributed through the draft as you are this year, does that give you more opportunities? You were saying some guys don't work out. Is that helpful in this process?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I mean, it's helpful. I think more than anything you've got to do a lot of your work early. You want to be a place that people feel like their players can get better. But it's a complicated thing. The agents have a hard job. They're trying to position the players in the best places they can be. We just have to be able to make the best decisions with whatever information we have.

I feel confident that we'll do that. I think we'll do that.

Q. In a perfect world, everything works out, you get lottery luck, whatever, what do you want to come out of the draft with? I know you're not going to tell me players, but --

SAM PRESTI: Well, I'm still thinking about a perfect world, because it doesn't exist. Look, at the end of the day we're going to add several players to this team. They're going to be potentially four, who knows, could be one, could be two, I don't know how many, but they'll be in the top 34.

I like the idea of having -- like adding to the group that we have, for continuity reasons. For me the most important thing is we've got to find somebody that fits our program and like really can connect with what we're trying to do and that we also can connect with them.

Like you want -- to my opinion what I would like some of these players to say is Oklahoma City gets me. Oklahoma City gets me. We're trying to constantly learn how to do that with each player, and it doesn't matter if it's a young player or an older player, but you've got to meet the players where they are and try and understand what they want from this and create a set of shared values so we can accomplish our goals together. It can't just be their goals and it can't just be our goals, it's got to be something that's done together, and then when you do have successful, I think it's that much more meaningful because you have ownership over it.

It's like I was saying before, the people that were standing to applaud Nenad and Chris and coal, like those people have skin in the game. Like I said, they bleed blue. Those are the real ones.

I want to find people that those people can cheer for, that they're going to be standing there cheering for those guys. That's hard, because not only do you have to understand

the player, you have to understand ourselves and where we are with things. We're not the same team or organization we were three, four years ago or 10 years ago. We're constantly changing and evolving, as well, just like the players are.

We're a work in progress, and I'd like to find people that we feel like can be their best selves here. I like that better than just having the most talented person. That's no guarantee that that's going to -- that that's all going to marry up once they're here.

Q. Speaking of the draft, you don't normally see a team hit or get contributions from four straight draft picks, which you guys did in one year. I know you said that when you evaluate a player you evaluate who they are as a person first, but was there a little bit of an evaluation difference that you went through --

SAM PRESTI: Anything different in that last draft?

Q. No, period, with that being the first draft of the rebuild. Was there a philosophy change?

SAM PRESTI: That's great question. I don't really think so. I think like the core stuff we've always looked for is pretty consistent. Really every one of those guys came like a different way. There are certain guys that were really locked in and there were other guys that kind of caught us -- like Wiggins really kind of caught us during the draft process. Like wait a second -- because he really impressed people with his first interview in Chicago. That was, wait a second, this guy is 21 or 51?

Each one of them is different. You just kind of work through it. But I don't think there was a real change in philosophy. We're just picking in different places. I think that does make a difference.

And then one of the big factors, and I should have said this right off the top, to your question, is Mark. I think he gives these guys confidence, and that's what we're about. We want the guys to be the best version of themselves. We want them to be together.

But I think he's done -- and the rest of the coaching staff has done a good job of taking the vision of the player that we might have and really working to bring that to life and maybe augment it at times or tell us, no, no, no, you guys got this wrong, we need to do this with this guy.

If there's one thing about Mark, the reason I like working with him, a lot of times when you work with people, and you guys might have this experience, too, you can share each other's opinions, and it's like, hey, I think this and you

have a great dialogue and it's like you listen to someone else, they listen to you, and you feel like a part of something. The thing I like about Mark and I is his idea can become my idea. My idea can become his idea. It's not my idea. It's like he can take what I'm saying and really work on that and build it and have it not feel like mine. You kind of forget like where it started from.

There's tons of player development examples of that where it's like, it doesn't just get volleyballed back and forth. It's like, what if we did this. You don't know who brought it to the table, so you're finishing each other's work in some ways.

That's been awesome. I've really enjoyed that. I think that permeates both between the front office and the coaches and then medical and performance. That's been good. I think he deserves a lot of credit because he's been able to take and really run with some different things and really make them better.

Q. Does having someone like that give you confidence in picking guys? Because all the guys raved about him, love playing for him.

SAM PRESTI: Absolutely, but I got to see that. I got to see that -- like I would go on the road with the G-League team once a year while he was the coach. So we've spent a lot of time together over the course of time. When he was in playoff series, he'd come up and he'd always sit -- he wouldn't sit behind the bench, he'd sit in the locker room because there wasn't a seat for him, and that's where I'd watch the game, so we watched a lot of playoff games together, and we'd talk about a lot of different things.

But like I would sit in -- I'll tell you a great story. We've got time, right, because I told you I'm going to be here all night, tip your waitresses and bartenders.

But I was in Sioux Falls. I want to Sioux Falls because I always tried to go on like the most egregious trip with the G-League team, the coldest place, the worst travel. I'm forgetting who was on the team. I think Daniel Hamilton and Dakari were on that team. Jannero Pargo was on that team. So we're in a Best Western in Sioux Falls and the bus slid off the road. I'm not even joking.

We're in a Best Western and there's like this little sports bar, and Jannero was in there, and he's a veteran guy. He had been in the NBA for a while. He was trying to fight his way through this.

I was there with I think Jannero and another younger player, I can't remember who it was right now. We were talking, and he was saying to the guy, like they were

talking, and somehow Mark came up. Jannero said, hey, you'd better listen, Mark is going to be coaching in the NBA one day, and that was years ago, and that was my first time, I was like -- so he sees what I see, okay.

But when you hear that from a guy that's been there and is now -- has every reason to be grumpy about the situation because he's been not staying in a Best Western playing basketball, I've seen that, and we've spent so much time together that we -- it's like not finishing each other's sentences. That's not what I'm saying. It's building on that. So it's like, how did we come up with that again? You don't know, because he can take ideas and make them his own, and vice versa, and there's no ownership over that, which I think helps in the development of players.

Q. Does it have anything to do with the fact that he didn't play in the league, that some players may first look at stats, former player --

SAM PRESTI: I mean, there's no substitute for that. In my job, too. You've played in the league, that's an unbelievable thing, because the league is all about players. Players mean everything in the league, whether you're playing -- there's no substitute for that. But I think everybody has to find their own voice. Everybody has their own personality. I don't think there's one way to do his job, my job, any job in the NBA. I think you bring your personality to that job and you throw yourself into that.

At the end of the day it's about players. I think Mark, myself, we've both been very fortunate to be around some good ones, which has really helped.

Am I sitting in front of you if I wasn't in San Antonio when David Robinson, Tim Duncan, Tony Parker, Manu Ginobili, that list of players is insane who came through those doors? Probably not. And then you can name the guys here and it's the same thing.

Putting the players first, trying to figure out how to help them achieve their goals I think is massive, and I think he does a good job with that.

Q. Such a young roster and new faces coming in with the draft, all the picks in the top 34, how valuable will Summer League be?

SAM PRESTI: Well, we're playing two. We're playing in Utah and we're also playing in Vegas. I think the Utah one will be a little more like Summer League veteran focused, and then Las Vegas will be more draft and maybe some roster guys. But I mean, any chance that a team has to play together is I think really, really valuable, at this stage of where the team is, like reps, experience, like that stuff

really is valuable.

We don't need everybody to be friends. That's not -- you don't need to be friends with everybody. But you've got to understand each other, because I think that makes a better team.

Putting the guys in situations for that is critical, and Summer League is a big factor in that.

We've also had a great tradition of guys playing Summer League here for a really long time. We like that, because we want our guys playing, we want our guys competing. They're going to be working out anyway. Then a lot of times guys will come out to Las Vegas and they'll organize pickup games out there and stuff like that.

Yeah, it's really, really important. For a team like us, we really have to carve our own pieces to a large degree based on the system we operate in. The Summer League, it makes a difference. But I think we also hopefully have earned like you can't overreact to Summer League. It's Summer League. It's a very small sample size.

It's only upside, but just because someone is successful in Summer League doesn't mean they're going to go to the Hall of Fame, and just because we don't play well -- it's just accumulated mileage together.

Q. Any indications on whether Josh is going to play this year and also Poku?

SAM PRESTI: Yes, Josh is going to play in Utah and a series of other guys will play in Utah. Poku is going to play in Utah. Here's the next question: Why is he playing this year and he didn't play last year? Because we have 150 days in the off-season. And last year we had -- I don't know the number, I want to say it's maybe half that, and we couldn't sacrifice the physical plan for the basketball plan.

This year I think we are going to be able to do both, and so yeah, he'll play in both, and we'll have a bunch of guys playing, but not all the way until Vegas or anything like that.

Q. Do you plan on entering any contract extension talks with Lu?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so we'll definitely have a conversation on that. I don't know when that will -- those conversations will really kind of pick up, but we will have some different options. I don't want to get into all of them, but the most important thing in those situations is trying to understand like where everybody is coming from and you need to work together. That's always been my experience on any of those situations. He's under contract technically

for two more years with the chance to look at something now.

We also have, as I talked about, in 2023, a significant amount of flexibility in that summer. It also happens to be a potential summer for CBA change depending on what the league does and the union does with the opt-out in December.

So there's a lot of moving parts. Like there really are a lot of moving parts. But if everybody is motivated you can put your head together and try to figure out how to make that work, or you can always wait, as well. But we haven't got into anything like substantive on that.

Q. Same goes for Darius, as well?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, same thing. Both of those guys are lined up where money would hit '23, so we don't have -- I think we'll kind of take each one of those separately and see what happens, but they're great. They're both great guys, and I want them to -- I want to hear what they're thinking, and I need them to understand, we have to also balance the interest of the team, as well.

But I feel like those guys are pretty invested in what we're trying to accomplish. We'll just work through it and do it in a way that hopefully can work for everybody if that's possible, great, otherwise we'll wait and get it the following year.

Q. Kenrich repeated last week that he wants to retire here, which is something you don't really hear from a 27 year old, but what do you hear when he says something like that, and also how does that affect possible decisions that you make with him?

SAM PRESTI: Well, what do I hear? I mean, I'm grateful, because listen, when we first arrived here in 2008, I think there was a lot of people that underestimated the opportunity and the potential for a team in Oklahoma City. My hope is that over the course of time, we're able to maintain that level of achievement in that people will be able to say they underestimated it.

I think one of the reasons or one of the signs of that would be guys like Kenrich Williams who are all about I think the right things, wanting to live here and play here. I mean, we would never take that for granted from any player.

Does that mean that we can just have everybody that wants to be here? No, that's not realistic. And not everybody will want to be here. There's different objectives. Sometimes there's financial considerations and family considerations and lifestyle considerations. There

might be a million things, who knows. But it's a good match with him. He's about the right stuff, so we really value that. Proud to have him on the team.

I couldn't tell you where that goes, but it's definitely positive, and I think he's bought in.

Q. What did you learn about Josh Giddey this season?

SAM PRESTI: You know, a lot. Just trying to think. So much. Two things come to mind. He's a very, very quick learner. His pace of learning I think exceeds his results, so I think -- and I think I would say that for the team. I think the pace of learning -- our pace of learning exceeds the results that we're seeing right now. I think Josh is learning quickly, and you may not get to see -- it's not being applied immediately.

From game to game, how people guard him, the way that he's able to -- we play them again, we try to do the same thing, he's ahead of that. Know what I mean?

But you saw that in his play the year before, as well. He's going to hit roadblocks just like every young player does. His ability to kind of war game through that pretty quickly is impressive, at 19.

I mean, every single day with all these guys you're learning about them.

I mean, I think he's about the right things. I think he's focused on winning. I think he understands dynamics of teams. But I also think he's 19. I think you've got to let -- you can't make a 22 year old a 32 year old. One of the things I do like is as the guys get older and they start saying things at 32 that you were telling them at 22, you're like, oh, okay, maybe there's -- that's good.

But guys have to get there on their own to a degree. You can create the environment for them and give them examples, but they have to find their own way, and a lot of times it's through trial of error. He's going to go through some stretches that will be difficult, like every young player, but one thing that's really stuck out to me is just watching the play-in games -- I love the play-in thing and I'm a big mid-season tournament supporter, as well, and even the early rounds of the Playoffs.

The impact that younger prayers are making in the postseason the last few years is pretty dramatic. I don't have a great answer for that as to why that's happening other than I think players are coming into the league more skilled than they have been, and I think a big part of that just goes to the effect that Steph Curry has had on youth basketball.

You're just seeing a much more skilled draft population as you go deeper and deeper into the draft, and then the ability to perform in some of these bigger settings is impressive for some of these younger players.

I thought Josh rose to the occasion several times this year. We're not playing in games of consequence, but to him they are because it's all he -- you only get to know what you know. I thought he stepped up in different situations. He's willing to try to make plays to win, which if you're willing to do that, you're also willing to fail, which I think is critical for a player that wants to be really good.

Q. Why do you like the mid-season tournament?

SAM PRESTI: Well, the thing I like about it is I think it's bold. I give Adam and Evan Wasch and Byron a lot of credit for thinking boldly, and I think it's very future oriented, and it takes courage to put something out there that is going to be probably maligned a little bit, maybe won't get the immediate love, but they're thinking bigger picture because, yeah, maybe they're going to have to withstand some scrutiny early. They're going to have to withstand some mocking. Like I said before, social media is a performance art, and there will be plenty of art going on about that, especially if there's a bad game or something like that happens.

But the long-term impact for the league, what that could mean, if a non-traditional fan base or a younger fan base can grow up with that and see that maybe in a different light than the first three or four years of it, I think it could do amazing things for the business.

I respect Adam's point of view on there needs to be more than one thing to win in the NBA. I think that's pretty astute. It also is an indication that you know that there's some competitive parity challenges for the league, and they're really looking to solve that. So I respect that.

You're starting with a premise and you're coming up with things that could solve that. I applaud that. I also applaud what they're doing with their officiating. They're repositioning, rebuilding and replenishing their officiating corps. They've made a decision that they need to have a better, deeper corps of officials in the future. In order to do that, there's no other way to do it other than sacrificing the quality of the officiating on some nights in order to get enough reps, enough experience and enough continuity and figure out who can officiate and who can't in bigger games.

What's the risk of that? Someone blows a call on national TV or something like that. But that's the best thing for the

future. I applaud that because that's not safe. That's hard to do. But it's necessary to have a better game in the future.

The mid-season tournament is necessary to have a better business and a better game in the future. But you've got to be willing to listen to the peanut gallery for a little while.

That's what leadership is, and I think -- I love what they're doing. I would definitely support it.

Q. You've said in the past that anyone who doesn't like long-term rebuilds, this is the system, especially in small markets. Like this is the only viable way to really go about it --

SAM PRESTI: Can I --

Q. Sure.

SAM PRESTI: Because you're using my words and feeding them back to me. That's depending on what your goals are. That isn't the only way. There is a million other ways. It's just what are your goals. That's all.

Q. Given the way that you see that, heading into 2023 and the impact the new CBA is going to have, I know this is a big-picture question, but do you expect anything that will change the current system or open up another pathway for a small market?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I have no -- first of all, I don't have any feel for that because I don't get that information. If I did, I would be crucified for saying anything, so I can't say anything.

I don't even want to speculate on that because the people that are working on that, it's so important for the future of the league that I don't want to do anything to mess that up.

But I would say what we can't have happen is to be mid-stream, which has happened, and a brand new bouquet of rules is introduced that is not advantageous to where you are in your building process. One time, okay; two times, hmm; but not happening three times. So we have to be eyes wide open on what that really means. Like I said, if I was a fan right now I'd shut my ears because this is not interesting, but if you're trying to run an NBA franchise in 2022 and beyond, in 20 of the 30 cities, you're going to be tuned into CBA, revenue sharing and TV deal. Those things really set the cast for how you operate.

Then no matter what it is, it's our job to figure out how to work within that, and I think we've done that.

Albeit at times people will make fun of what we're doing or try to name it a certain thing or whatever, but we're trying just to accomplish our goals within the system in which we're having to work and not sacrifice our aspiration. It would be easy to do that, but we're choosing not to do that.

Like you said, there's more than one way to do that. Like if we were going to burn the boats to get to 40 wins, we could certainly do that. Is that in the best interest of the long-term of the Thunder? Probably not. People can mock us for not doing that, call us uncompetitive, whatever it is. The most competitive thing to do is exactly what we're doing, is taking a slow approach, not looking at the clock, letting other people do that, setting a pace for how we need to operate in Oklahoma City, and being confident in what we're doing.

Q. Any thoughts on Poku's trajectory? You've seen him for a couple seasons.

SAM PRESTI: You know, I think his second halves have been great, and I think you have to look at the season in totality, and it's another great reminder how young the players are, especially him, he was the youngest player in the NBA last year. It's going to take a lot of time with him, as it should. It's a long-term, speculative process with him. But he's gotten better every season, especially second half. His mentality is better.

When I say that, I mean he's doing more things that can't be counted, and that's the kind of stuff that he has to be able to do.

He's got a huge summer in front of him. He knows that, as do all the guys, and he's going to have to come back in training camp and start all over again. But I think that's what he wants. I think he wants to be a good player, and that's what it's going to take.

I'm proud of where he's come to. There's no question the G-League has been a huge help and accelerator for him, and that's why we've used it strategically for two years and we'll probably use it again next year quite a bit, as well. I don't know specifically with him, it depends on where we are and where he is, but I like where he's at. The age is -- he's just very, very young, so we have to take a long view on that one, and we're going to. We knew that when we -- you can't get bored with that stuff. Just because you see somebody all the time, the tendency for a lot of people is like well, I've seen that, I want to -- I think that's happened with Baze a little bit. Sometimes people will make real harsh judgments, 20 games into the season out of 82 and then by the end of the season, like it's a much different story. People are ignoring their previous bold takes.

Q. You brought up the G-League; the last few years it seemed like no matter who you guys bring up, they give some type of contribution. You don't see that with pretty much any other team. You look this year when COVID was happening for every team in the league, those guys wouldn't last but you guys had guys that would last or get contracts from other teams. Was there a conversation that was had that you said we need to start using the G-League in a better way?

SAM PRESTI: No. I think what it is to be honest with you is an accumulation of 14 years. It takes a lot of time to build that infrastructure. It takes a lot of time to get the thing really vertical in your organization. It's one organization, right; the Blue are a subset of us. There's Blue coaches here all the time, Thunder coaches over there, vice versa, front office. It's one program.

But that's also the value of the style of play. Like we can bring those guys up and feel confident that they would know terminology, know the reads, understand the coverages. But it takes a lot of time to have organizational continuity in that way, the value of continuity there.

That's why we've exclusively called up from there the last three years because we've been building to that for years, and obviously Mark being the head coach only helps that more.

But it's not -- I wouldn't say it's a conversation. It was a conversation of hey, we want one day to reshape the way the G-League, at least for us, is seen. We're doing that. We'd rather take somebody that is a little less talented and put them in that position than somebody that we have to fly in and teach them everything, not just on the court but off the court, too.

Q. Do you think how close the teams are helps in a way because --

SAM PRESTI: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. We have a challenge on our hands because the NBA or the G-League doesn't want us playing in our arena next year. You know, conversation probably not for the public, but like it is an NBA arena, so it should be good enough for the G-League. But I don't get into that.

To me it's about -- development is about players. It's about players. It's what's best for the players. We have NBA facilities, everyone loves playing in our facilities, hotel right there. I understand the G-League has a view on how they want to be perceived, but I wouldn't want to sacrifice the environment for our players because we don't have enough people in the stands. I get it, we'll try to get some more people there for the G-League if that's the key, but the

G-League is for investment and to help our parent team, have them be ready for that. So that's how I look at it.

But I'll fill you in once we know how that's going to go. We've got to find a solution there.

We're not a major metropolitan city where there's a million small venues everywhere, and we have designs on maybe potentially doing something locally where we build our own, our own G-League facility, but we can't do that, execute a plan like that that would be great for the community if we're renting everywhere.

Again, these are not issues that people really care about, but we're an hour and a half in, so that's where we are.

Q. Without getting to the salary floor, was that at some point conveyed to some of the current players that that was going to be like a reward in some sense for getting through the season? I know there's other factors --

SAM PRESTI: Getting through the season. Tell me what you mean by getting through the season.

Q. It's a long year, those are the guys that have stuck with you and been around for the year and --

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so 82 games. Everyone plays 82 games. Everyone has the same opportunity for 82 games, to use the 82 games to improve, to get better. Some teams have a second season in the Playoffs, other teams have a second season of development essentially. Right now we're in the second season of development, trying to turn it into a second season of postseason eventually.

When we were sitting there at the deadline, we just didn't like anything that was being thrown at us to use that space comparatively to the opportunity to roll it over to the draft. Now, it doesn't roll over to July 1, but we will have that room at the draft. I would put the odds of using that room pretty low. But I'd still rather have those odds than the things that were being presented to us Thursday afternoon, and we also are able to -- our players are able to get the benefit of that decision.

But that's not why the decision was made. It was made because there was a shared -- there's a shared outcome in that. It was the best thing for the team, and the players benefitted from that. We did talk to the players about that, because if you don't in today's world, they're going to read it on Twitter. You'd rather have them have the information versus opinion on something like that.

But that didn't mean it was going to stay like that because

each time we used a hardship player, that would eat into that slightly. But it was conveyed to them in the sense of like what would happen, but we couldn't tell the future, and then we didn't go into it saying this is what we want to do.

But yeah, the guys, for two years they've answered the bell competitively, and as we're going through this repositioning, I don't see it as a bad thing. I don't know that it will ever happen again in the NBA, just to be that low, to be that far under, but as I said before, repositioning financially, that's also cap but that's also cash.

Q. Ty Jerome said at his exit interview that he thought that the attitude and the development of a team is indicative of the example set by whoever the leader is, and he was drawing that to Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and how positive he is at practice and the energy he brings to games and his outlook on the season. What do you think he's done specifically to help develop the team and his attitude and style?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a carryover from last year. It's like, he just has a good -- he's got a good energy to him. Again, I wouldn't call it positive, I'd call it optimistic. I think there's a big difference there, as we talked about before.

I think he's got a quiet confidence to him. He's extremely encouraging. He's learning every single day how to help his teammates. That's like a beautiful thing for anyone that likes basketball. He's thinking about that.

Now, he also is on the very precipice of the beginning of like his own career, so it's a lot to ask of somebody that's like, hey, I know you are still trying to establish yourself in the league, but understand that the more you give, the more you get back. I think his sophistication of how he's approached the game is much different, much different.

I'm going to give you two stories for that. This one no one knows. This is a new one. The night that we traded Russell, I was writing that op-ed and I was getting off the phone with Daryl and then writing a couple lines and then getting back on the phone with Daryl, then talking to Thad, Russell's agent, then talking to Russell.

We had basically wrapped up the trade. It was pretty late, and I was walking down one of the hallways in the building and I heard a ball bouncing. I walked into someone's office that had a window. I think there may have been three people in the building, and I looked out the window, and Shai was working out. He had just got here. I said hi to him or something. It was pretty quick. He was just -- he was in there working out with I think it was one of his agents. I can't remember exactly. It was kind of a blur because I was pretty emotional about the whole Russell

thing and then we have these new guys coming in and it was -- you know, it was a very -- you just didn't know which way was one.

He didn't even have Thunder gear on. That I remember because I was like, why doesn't this guy have Thunder gear? What is this? What kind of shop are we running here?

It was just ironic to me, and I thought, if this guy ever becomes a player, I've got to remember this story. I'm confident enough now to tell you the story, because I think this guy is going to be a player.

I had another story -- oh, I know. The other one was during the season, I think it was -- I even wrote the date down, January 17th, we were playing Dallas. There was like a six- or seven-minute stretch there that I thought was the best basketball we played all season. I thought Shai was just immaculate. I thought the whole team was functioning at a really high level. I think it was our best -- less patterns, more rhythm. We came back from a huge deficit. It was like no one was speaking. We were just playing in such sync. The shots were easy and they were in rhythm. The defense was connected. Lu made some ridiculous block, physical, at the rim, and we just inched ourselves back in.

But it wasn't anything spectacular. I couldn't even tell you if we won the game, to be honest with you. We didn't win the game. We lost. But that basketball, that was a look at what it could potentially be over time.

There was just a symmetry of the group and a fortitude of the group. I sent that section of the game to Mark, and we talked about it later, and like you don't -- you don't know when that stuff happens, and it's very fleeting during a season. A lot of times you think things take longer than they should, but when they happen, they happen faster than you thought they could.

I thought that was an example of that. You think things should take -- you think things are taking longer than they should, but then when they happen, they happen faster than you thought they could. That six minutes, it was like, where did that come from? Well, it came from all the games up to January 16th and then last year's games and then we slipped into this rhythm where everybody was playing at a high level and Shai was the driving force because it was his poise behind the wheel so to speak because he was getting guys involved and guys were playing off each other and it was fun to watch, and it wasn't just pretty, it was physical. We were putting people on their backs.

That's basketball. That's how you've got to play as a young team. You cannot flinch in the Western Conference. You cannot flinch. They're coming at you every night and you have to be able to hold your spots, and we have to be able to do that figuratively and literally over the next several years if we want to accomplish what we want.

Q. Speaking of that, the East actually seemed to have a better year this year than the West. Does that change your outlook in terms of rebuilding and what you need to be to be elite in the West?

SAM PRESTI: I think the last two years are really hard years to make many predictions off of, primarily because of the injuries in the league and COVID. Number one, COVID has -- a lot of the standings were really affected by that period of time because it wasn't like everyone got it at the same time. Everyone was going through -- the schedule never meant more than this year because it was like, who was playing against whom, with whom available. It was totally different than who was playing against whom.

Then the injuries from the last two off-seasons, I cannot underscore that enough. You're looking at -- I think the Clippers have probably the best roster in basketball and probably will win a title maybe multiple times in the next couple years. They're really, really good, but they're playing without a lot of their weapons. They still have a lot of veteran role players that are really, really good players, enough to keep them in the conversation, but those two guys are all-world.

Golden State had injuries through the year, on down the line. Everyone. But the East had it, too. But I think you've got to see -- you need a better baseline than this year to say that definitively because I think it's going on 22 out of 23 years where the winning percentage is higher in the West than the East and that's playing each other, too, in the West. That's not a balanced schedule; that's like the West playing the West, the East playing the East. I've given up trying to figure out why that is. I have no idea. If it changes, that's better for the Thunder. But I don't know that that's the case.

You just look at the young players that are playing in the West now that are really playing well. I mean, it's great for the game. But I think this year is pretty unique in the sense that the injuries for everybody and the balance of the schedule as a result of COVID was really tricky. I don't know. Hopefully the Playoffs will be more even.

Q. What has it been like for you to work along Nazr and Nick in the front office and what you've learned from them and also how they've evolved into those roles?

SAM PRESTI: I love working with them. As I said before, our guys are like everything for this organization. I had good relationships with them, I felt -- I've known Nazr since I was with the Spurs, and Nick was probably the only guy on the Seattle team that didn't ask me to be traded. He always had a soft spot in my heart for that.

But I think I just learned from players in general. Mike Wilks, Eric Maynor, those guys, Nazr, Nick, Anthony Morrow when he was here, you're always learning from those guys they have such great experiences, and they have corporate knowledge here, so they have a really unique insight into history of the organization and also history of the Thunder.

They've both really grown exponentially. They're both involved in the coaching process. They're both involved with the draft. Nazr is heavily involved with the trade deadline. Nick knows the draft pretty well now. He's been out and watched a lot of players, and I really trust his instincts on a lot of different things.

So I love working with those guys. I think they both have really bright futures. I want to be in a position where if they go on to do bigger and better things outside of the Thunder or if they stay here, that they really feel like they got a really good ground-up start from the exposure we're giving them.

But we're not cutting them any slack. Those guys are working and traveling, and they're not on scholarship, and that's one of the things we talked about, is are you really ready to do this, and they're ready to do what they're doing now. Now, are they ready to do more? That's going to be a conversation that's on going and we're going to have to talk about, but I think the sky's the limit for both guys. I think they have great futures. I say that about other people in our organization, as well, but I think they bring a lot to the group, as does Mike Wilks and Eric. I'm sure there will be other guys in the future that will step through the doors, and I think that's a positive thing for us.

Q. With this rebuild now, do you ever feel any pressure, not to the point where you say you make a questionable mistake, but just like I drafted three straight Hall-of-Famers, we made it to The Finals? Is there any internal conversation with yourself that you're having?

SAM PRESTI: Only if you -- like to me, a big part -- skill is recognizing when you've been fortunate, and I know we've been very fortunate. I don't think it's like -- if you assign yourself credit for things you probably don't deserve credit for, I could see you maybe having some pressure because

you don't really in your heart believe that you can do it again. I don't know how that happened. I think it was a lot of things that came together.

But the main thing is Kevin Durant is a basketball god, James Harden is a basketball genius, and Russell Westbrook is a basketball warrior. It's like, I don't know, that happened, but it wasn't because we happened to like bring it out of them.

I think we created an environment where they could be their best selves, and they've all exceeded expectations.

Look, I just feel very fortunate, but I know that wasn't like us. We just have to keep applying the same principles and processes that allowed that to happen. But that's probably never going to happen again. That's okay. That was an incredible thing that happened, but we're not competing with our past. That was a great thing, but we're not competing with our past.

We're trying to create a future. I don't know what that's going to look like. I don't know if that's going to be four Western Conference Finals in six years. I have no idea. That's the beauty of what we're doing, though. We're going to enjoy and embrace and love whatever happens from here because it's going to be ours and the people that are walking with us. It's going to be individually ours, Oklahoma's. Whatever happens next, we're going to own that.

Q. (Indiscernible) looks pretty good.

SAM PRESTI: Well, back to what I was saying initially, which was it's all about the players. I mean, the guys that we've had here, you wouldn't be saying that, or no one would be saying anything about me or the Thunder if Serge Ibaka isn't him or Reggie or Steven or Domas or -- I don't know, whoever else was mentioned. Those guys do the work. We try to put them in positions to be successful and put them first, but it's players at the end of the day.

When I say that, I don't mean like you have to fall at their knees or give them a smoothie every time they turn the corner. I think people confuse player environment with like amenities. It's nothing to do with amenities. Every team in the NBA has amenities. Every team in the NBA has chefs and flies on nice planes. That's just like baseline stuff.

It's just trying to put them in positions to be successful, meeting them where they are, and like I said before, we've gotten better at that. But the players are what make it go. That's what I would say central driving force of why we're even talking about the Thunder if years where we haven't been that good is because of our players and the status

they have achieved in our uniform together. We've all done it together. But it's them, in our uniform, making Oklahoma City relevant to countries far and away from here.

Q. What books are you reading this summer?

SAM PRESTI: So does that mean -- are we ready?

Q. I've got one more. You watched Brooklyn and Boston yesterday. Did that make you miss the Playoffs even more? I know it's only been two years, but --

SAM PRESTI: I don't need that to miss the Playoffs. I mean, yeah, I started in 2000, and I don't know how many years I haven't been experiencing that, but I've been a part of three championship teams, and the four out of six that went to the Final Four here. I've been blessed to be on the right side of a lot of 48-minute games.

I don't love having to go through the pain of trying to recreate a level of competitive success in Oklahoma City any more than anyone else does. In fact, if there was an accelerate button that I could feel comfortable hitting that I wouldn't feel would be a detriment to the organization, I'd be the first one up to tap it. But until then, I'm going to be the first one protecting that button from anyone else punching it, too, because it's going to be the worst thing if we lose our focus, our grit, our determination and all of the things that make Oklahomans who they are.

The most competitive thing to do is don't hit that frigging button, because guess what, it's not going to be easy -- there ain't going to be a button like that in the future. You're going to be searching around like where is that thing. You use it and it's over, and now we're in a different realm. We have to compete. Competing happens on the floor, off the floor, and discipline is a huge part of any level of competition, and we have to show organizational discipline.

I look at Minnesota the other night and their celebration and the way they reacted, and that's pure euphoria. They haven't won a playoff series since 2004, and now they have a chance to at least get to that. That's beautiful, and that's why I say, when it happens here, no matter like when it happens, I don't know when that's going to happen. It could be a while. It might happen quickly. I don't know, we'll know when it happens.

It's going to be an amazing experience for people because they're going to have walked the path and earned it, and people's a lot of hard work is going to have gone into that. Some of our players may not be here for that. Staff

members may not be here. But they're going to be the catalysts for that. And I want that really, really bad. I want to see those families walk through the doors in a day like this, very much like this, when playoff basketball is back here and people are going to be like, I'm willing to let it rip because he earned it.

And I want them to feel like, and guess what, we have a chance to be back here next year, too.

Your question was the book, because I think it is that time, although if anyone has any other questions -- I think "The White Album" by Joan Didion is the most recent thing that I've read, and I found it to be really, really good. I had never really read anything from her, because I watched a documentary about her and I was like really taken by her personality and everything. Obviously she just recently passed but I had read it before that. That was really good.

There's a book called "The Sweet Spot" by Paul Bloom, and then I'm reading currently "Shackleton," about the explorer for the endurance who says, "men wanted for hazardous journey, unlikely to return alive," and he got 13 to go and then saved their lives when they got stuck in the ice. I've always been interested in that story but I didn't know -- this is a full-on biography of him, which is really interesting.

With that --

Q. I had one for you, Sam. Friday night the Pelicans did you a small favor. How big of a deal was that to go from 15 to 12?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I think --

Q. How valuable is that to the franchise to potentially pick at 12 instead of 15?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, yeah. The way I would look at it is what would it cost you to go from 15 to 12 on draft night. It could cost -- it's definitely costing something.

Yeah, we were the benefit of that situation. We've been not the benefit, as we saw last year with Houston. So we have a lot of bets placed. We're going to not come up big on a lot of them. Some of them we get moderately fortunate on. We haven't got into all the swaps yet. When we get down the line here and the swaps start coming, that's going to be even more spatially challenging for all of us.

But the Clippers, like I said before, I don't think we're going to be looking at that again. I think they're going to be the odds-on favorite to probably win the title in the future.

But anything like that is beneficial to us. It helps us with where we're at. But I would look at it like how do you go from 15 to 13, what would you give up, and it would cost you something probably significant in order to make a jump like that at that part of the draft.

15 would have been -- we obviously did those trades, like we didn't expect anything like that. That's probably the best we'll do, and we'll see what we can do with it.

Q. You've got three first-round picks. You've got a lot of young players. Can you have too many first-round picks if you use them? Do you need three more first-round rookies?

SAM PRESTI: Do you mean in one year or in general?

Q. Like this year, right now.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so I do think it's important to say that I hear that like, you have so many picks. We're not going to draft like 28 people. But if you look at the history of who's been traded in the last two trade deadlines in the summer for draft assets, CJ McCollum was a first-round pick and a second-round pick; Larry Nance was a first-round pick coming from Portland. I'm just working off the game we were talking about. Two second-round picks, Evan Fournier, Markkanen was a first-round pick, Vucevic was two first-round picks. So those additional draft assets are not just there to draft, they're there to fill out the team.

Again, to your earlier point, once we have a better understanding of where the ceilings are, but if you just start dealing those things, you're predicting, which I can't do, what the team is going to need two to three years from now.

To your specific question, this year, we obviously only have 15 spots, so you have to make a decision as to how many players -- if you're going to add four, you're going to have to move four out.

One thing I don't think has been explored enough, though, in the NBA, is just drafting everybody and then figuring it out. I think a lot of times people are like, we have to move these picks. Why? We have -- training camp doesn't start until October or November, so let's draft four times, get four top-34 players, let them fight it out. Yeah, we might have to eat some money somewhere along the way, but we're competing with teams that have \$300 million payrolls and going up. There might be some money that needs to be swallowed to give us more time.

But to not select a player that you like because you don't

have a roster spot for them today, to me I don't -- I don't know if that's the wisest thing.

Now, last year we were prepared to pick twice but we wanted Jeremiah. We might just pick every single one of these and then create a competition in camp and say let's see who sticks, and we'll have to figure that out. If we have to cut some good players, then we'll have to cut some good players, but I wouldn't want to pass on players that we like just because we don't have a roster spot that day for them.

I could see us picking four times, but I don't know that all four of those guys will necessarily start the season with us. I don't know. It all comes down to value, what else is being offered at that time.

I could see us trading the 12th pick depending on what comes to us. But you know, I wouldn't put my odds on that. I think that we'll probably value that pretty highly, especially in this draft where I think it's pretty good.

But we'll see what comes of it, but I wouldn't be afraid for us to pick every pick and then we'll see what happens. Like the season doesn't start the next day. We're probably not a huge free agent team this summer because where our finances are, and primarily we were comfortable with that because we know '23 is where a lot of things come off the books and we'll have more flexibility. We might dabble in that a little bit more at that point. We'll know what we have, and mostly what will be on there will be Shai and a lot of first-round small salaries and then whatever we do with Darius and Lu and whether we do it now or we wait.

It's one thing we've talked about internally, I just don't know why -- why not take the players, figure it out later but don't pass on guys just because you don't have a slot for them that day. Things happen. Trades, you've got the whole summer to go through, training camp, the salaries are relatively cheap, and like I said before, if someone else is going to spend \$300, \$400 million and it's just going to keep going, we're going to have to -- it may cost some money to make some money because if you hit on one of those guys because you're willing to take someone that otherwise you didn't want to take because you didn't have a spot and he turns in to be a good player, it's well worth whatever the cost is.

I don't know that I would have thought that way 10 years ago, but the NBA is a totally different place. It's a totally different animal.

We'll do this again. I know it's long, but like I said before, I'll stay for every question because it's my job to do that, and you guys cover the fan and you're our best gateway to our fans, which is critical for us, and I want them to have as

much information as possible about what we're thinking.
That's just how we operate.

Thank you, guys.

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