

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti

Press Conference



SAM PRESTI: Just before we get started, just a couple thoughts on this evening and then happy to take any questions.

I'm on record as saying that the lottery is a pretty unique night in the league. I think it's one of the few nights that materially affects the future of the league in a way that's pretty significant. It's definitely a big night, not just for the Thunder but for the entire league and everyone that's involved with it.

With that being said, I think everybody understands that we have absolutely no control over how this night is going to go or how it's going to play out, and in this case, the outcome matters a lot more than the odds.

There are odds and there's probabilities, but they matter very little because it's not like they're running the lottery simulation a hundred, 10, 15 times. They're doing it once. The outcomes matter more than the odds here. We've had some experience with that.

Because of that, there's these big swings that can happen. You can be picking as low as eight, you could be picking as high as one. We just have to kind of understand that we have no control over that, and we'll just roll with whatever the outcome is and make the most of it because that's the system that we have.

I do think it's worth noting that since the last time we drafted in the top 5, it's 2009, 80 percent of the league has drafted in the top 5, and beyond that, half of the league has drafted twice in the top 5, and one third of the league has drafted three times in that span, and I believe one team has drafted eight times in the top 5 since that point in time.

So it gives you an idea of just how often teams are in that position across the league, and in some cases it's very beneficial, and in other cases it doesn't work out quite as well as the data would make you think.

But it affects every team differently, and for us, and we've been very clear and transparent about the fact that chance

and luck play an outsized role in the NBA, irrespective where your team is located. You're going to need luck on the margins for sure.

Obviously for a good majority of the teams, luck in the lottery is pretty big indicator of future success.

It makes me also always come back to one concept, which is that the NBA is not really like a chess game. In a chess game, everybody starts from the same place, have the same number of pieces, and you get to the end of the game and you start over and everybody goes back to the same square, goes back to the same starting point.

The NBA is more like poker, where you get a very random hand and you have to play the hand that you're given. Those hands can be dealt to you in different ways. Could be the outcome of the lottery, could be different things.

I think the real skill comes in being able to play the hands that you've been dealt over time to the best of your ability and to be able to stay in the game to continue to have future hands.

A lot of times I think chess is a really good example of things that go well, but I think in relation to the NBA, I think the NBA is more like poker because of the uncertainties and the fact that so much of it is out of your hand, and everyone is starting from a different starting point.

As far as the probabilities go, which I mentioned earlier, have some use but not a ton, the likelihood is that we're going to be -- the numbers would say picking sixth or seventh. So we understand that that's most likely where the pick is going to be. But even if that's the case, it's a three-step process, right. One, you have to find out where you're selecting; two, you have to make a selection; and three, you have to help develop the player and create an environment for the player.

Tonight is just the first step of that process for us, which is getting clarity on where we're going to be selecting, no matter where that is.

We've been here before. We've been in the lottery last year. We know that just because we picked later last year, moved back last year, I think we still have a successful draft. We have to remember that the lottery and the way



that luck plays is totally impersonal. It's unemotional. It's dispassionate, and it's totally independent. It doesn't really care what happened last year, good or bad. It's just going to come out the way that it does.

I think the number one thing that we've learned is that no matter what happens in any scenario as an organization, we're never going to let a bad night drag us down. We're going to just keep persisting. We're going to keep thinking, we're going to keep grinding away.

As we set out to reposition, replenish and ultimately rebuild our team, we knew that it would be a series of drafts. We didn't know where those draft picks would be, but this is our second -- this is going to be our second draft, and it's a big night for us to just find out where it is we're going to be drafting from. We're really excited about that.

I'm also really excited about the fact that our players back in Oklahoma City, and we have a large portion of them in the gym right now, are working extremely hard and making use of those 150 days that they had for the off-season. I'm really encouraged by that, as I've said before, at the end of the season a lot of the improvement from our team is going to be coming from inside of our current building and maybe not so much from what happens tonight or in the draft, but I couldn't be more proud of the effort that the guys are showing right now.

Regardless of the outcome tonight. We know we don't have any ownership of it, even if it goes well. We don't have any control over it if it goes poorly. But it's a great experience, and I think it's something that all of our fans should embrace and everybody should embrace for what it is, which is a pretty -- it's kind of a pretty wacky way to help teams or have any type of strategy attached to it in terms of team building or business building. But that's the system, and experience for what it is.

For us, the most important thing will be for us to assess it once it's over and then respond to it, have a plan and get ready for the draft, which I'm really excited about. As long as we're continuing to operate with the principles of discipline, rationality and persistence, I really think good things are going to happen for us as an organization, if not tonight, they'll happen at another point in time, but with good things we have to be aware and observant about where they happen and then make the most of them.

With that, I'll answer any questions.

Q. We obviously see what happens on the actual broadcast, but can you take us inside the drawing room and what it's like being in there with the other executives and just kind of what that looks like?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I haven't been there in so long. It was 2009, so just think about how the world has changed since then. I couldn't even tell you, back then there were some tables and -- I don't remember much about it. Some white boards and the machine in the front.

This year I have no idea what to expect, quite honestly. But you're sequestered away in there. You just don't have any contact with anybody.

Q. A lot has been made about the top three guys in this draft. There seems to be some sort of consensus with Holmgren, Banchemo and Jabari Smith. I'm wondering if you see a similar consensus and how important landing in the top three is going to be.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, one thing for us is our rating systems and our rankings are never consensus oriented. What we think and how we have players grouped or rated, I would actually be disappointed if it was consensus oriented because I want us to have a very independent thought on how we look at the players.

The other thing is those ratings, we don't really even finalize those until a little bit before the draft, to be honest with you. They're always changing.

I think the draft -- I like the draft. I'm always an optimist on the draft in general because I always think there's good players. Historically you can go look at the history of the draft; there's always really good players that are in every single draft. They never go one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. In fact, very rare that that happens. They're sprayed out throughout the 60 picks, and it's our job to try to shift the odds the best and see if we can find somebody that's going to help our team for a long time.

Q. Just given kind of what you laid out earlier about being a big night but having kind of no control of it and being there, how are you feeling?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, I think being here last year, it was a different experience again because we hadn't been here for so long, but as Hemingway said, no horse named morbid ever won a race. So I'm excited, I'm optimistic, I'm looking forward to it. I don't see any reason not to. It's not as if we have control over it.

So being downtrodden about it or skeptical about it, I don't think that does any good. Obviously expecting great things to happen, that doesn't really do any good, either, but it beats the alternative. We just have to see where we head.

I'm most excited about just learning where we're going to



pick. For what I do, that's the most important thing because then we can start really looking at things and building out plans, which is the thing that I think a lot of us in the front office are excited about doing.

Q. I think you did this last year, did one of these chats with us before the lottery. I'm curious, why do you choose to do them before the lottery and not immediately after?

SAM PRESTI: Because that way you'll believe what I say, because if we got to the end of the lottery and I did some type of avail, it would be completely based off of the emotion of what happened. It's something you have zero control over. I think it's more authentic to do it beforehand, because if we happen to have great success, we can't own that. It's not like it's ours. If we happen to move back and don't do as well in the lottery, that's not ours, either.

I'd rather just be more upfront about the fact that I'm available ahead of time. I don't know what's going to happen. I think it emphasizes the role of luck and chance in this entire thing. That's the reason why, because if we do it afterward and I say, yeah, we're at 8, that's exactly where we want to be, that's pretty intuitive of course that's probably not the best outcome for us. I'd rather just be more upfront about it on the front end and let everybody else determine kind of how it goes for us.

The other aspect of that is it's one step of the process. We'll find out where we're picking, but the next step is to pick the player, and then the third step is to develop the player with the player over a long period of time.

This is a very arbitrary way to get to a starting point, but it doesn't -- it's not a prescription for success or failure by any stretch.

Q. I know you make long-term decisions based on long-term data, you don't make quick decisions, but anything in these Playoffs that you've seen so far make you sort of restock and rethink any of your philosophies or any of your strategic goals? Of course I'm referring to the spacing that we saw out of Dallas and Boston and Golden State.

SAM PRESTI: Well, I would say -- well, strategic goals, what do you mean by that?

Q. I mean just the kind of players you want, the kind of talent and skill you're looking for.

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think, number one, we're always adapting and evolving. We're always checking our theories, our philosophies over time because things are

always changing.

But I also think sometimes when you try to mimic things or you imitate things in the now that you can get caught on that, too, because it's not going to be the same by the time you get there.

There are some just like basic fundamentals that I think are always rewarded in the NBA, but I also think that sometimes the trends and things of that nature are born out of match-ups and decisions that are made in a one-time situation, and sometimes people can overreact to those because of the specific matchup or specific instance.

I wouldn't overreact too much to just one series or one playoff series.

Q. You've used words such as arbitrary, chance, luck, all that stuff. Do you have any thoughts on maybe how to improve this system and picking like this? Have you shared them with anybody?

SAM PRESTI: You know, I'm not really denigrating the system at all. But it is -- when you look at history and you see a lot of teams that have had success, I think luck and chance play a huge role in success in sports. If you could just look at the teams playing right now or any teams in the second round or have any form of success, they're having a significant amount of luck that's rolled into their success. It may not have happened in the draft lottery, although many of them have, but there's other forms of luck that's taken place throughout the season or in a series.

We've seen with injuries at ill times in the history of our organization.

There's just a huge -- luck plays a much bigger role in all of our lives than we like to admit because a lot of times what it does is it doesn't allow us to take credit for things that maybe we shouldn't be taking credit for, and we also like to blame a lot of things on bad luck, but we don't like to give good luck as much credit.

I think the system itself, I don't know that the lottery is -- the system of lottery is much of an issue. The real question I'd be asking is why is it such an important night for a select group of teams. Why is that the case. That to me is the downstream effect of bigger issues as far as access to elite talent and how it's distributed in the NBA. But I don't think that's the lottery's fault, I just think it puts an enormous amount of weight on something that is not skill based.

Q. Why did you guys choose Nick to represent you at the lottery tonight?

SAM PRESTI: He guaranteed a successful evening.

Q. It's as simple as that?

SAM PRESTI: It was that simple. It only cost me a statue. So I said, that's fine. But the statue will not be of you playing, it will be of you holding up a card that says that.

Q. You don't really strike me as a superstitious person, but is there anything you do, luck oriented, before you do this, woke up and did something that morning? Anything you can tell us on that front?

SAM PRESTI: The biggest superstition I have is I don't talk about my superstitions. That's the number one rule. I will not do that.

Q. That's not a very helpful answer.

SAM PRESTI: I've got a couple things that I like to think will -- I think more than anything make me feel good having, but I don't know that they're going to tip the scales.

It's a really unique situation to be in. I've kind of come to embrace it, knowing that you don't have any control. I think when you're a GM, you kind of have that feeling a lot like when you're sitting there in a playoff game, like you don't have a lot of control of the outcome. It's just like you're kind of -- you're an observer. At the very best case tonight, I'm as much of an observer as you would be or anyone else. I wish it was not a simulation that was run one time, but it is, and that's the best way to make it random.

Otherwise I'd lean more heavily on the odds, but the real key is how far you can potentially move back in a worst case scenario, and obviously for us that would be 8, and I still think we'll get somebody there that we think is really good.

Q. Your talking about luck, both good and bad, makes me think that a lot of people in sports are very remiss to give luck much credence, good or bad. Was there something along that way that happened or somebody that you crossed paths with that maybe refined your thinking on just the idea that luck is part of sports and you just have to kind of accept it?

SAM PRESTI: I don't know about that. That's a great question. I think it's more probably stems from some level of like just -- I live a lot in gratitude and really thinking through why things happen, and a lot of times there's no explanation for certain things that happen. You just have to appreciate them.

I also think just being mindful and really noticing when

good things happen is an important thing to do in today's day and age especially because so many of the bad things are pointed out to us. Now they're being pointed out to us in more sophisticated ways. Sometimes we don't even realize they're being pointed out to us and it's just raining down on us. I don't say it in a way to say it's bad. I've said for a long time we're very fortunate to have Kevin Durant or Russell or James or Serge or any of the other players that we've had. That's a lot of good fortune. I wish I could tell you that we knew or we had the answers to that. But we also had made selections that didn't work out as well, and we own those, too.

That's why it's different than chess. I say chess is something that sets up, everybody starts at the same place. In the NBA, it's poker because you're dealing with whatever hand you're getting dealt, and you have to make the most of whatever is made of you in that situation, and everybody is in a different stage.

I just think it's a more rational way to look at things than kind of attaching yourself to the story that you want to tell yourself. It's not a one-time thing, either. The best thing we can do as an organization is to minimize bad luck and maximize good luck. I'd like to think that we've been able to do that because we're one of those few teams that hasn't picked in the top five since '09, so there's 20 percent of the league that hasn't.

As I read that list off, there's teams that have picked quite a few times in the top 5, and it certainly helps you a lot. But if you're winning consistently, you're not going to be in that position.

Q. Do you think when you were a baby GM first couple years, do you think you had that kind of perspective on all of that?

SAM PRESTI: Ooh, I think I had a healthy perspective on good fortune for sure, and I think a lot of that came from the Spurs. Pop talked about that a lot. My grandfathers were heavy on that with me.

I think that goes back to just gratitude, appreciating what you have. Happiness is wanting what you have, not getting what you want. That was something that was said to me when I was really young.

Q. How much time you've seen this process in this lottery draft from your perspective, and what makes the Thunder as an organization such an attractive place for players to develop?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, I think as far as what makes us attractive, well, there's only 30 teams in the NBA, so I

think every player is grateful to play in the NBA. But I think more than anything, it's a collective group of people that are all pulling in the same direction. We've got a great ownership group, just tremendous. I think just not only great people but they really -- I think they're extremely philanthropic. I think they care deeply about the organization, about the city, and I think that funnels down through the rest of the organization.

I think we have fans that are extremely loyal and invested in the team, and I can't speak for the players, but hopefully they look at other players that we've had and the ability that they've been able to realize since they've been with us, but again, like that's not really all of us. That's the players. We've been fortunate to have good ones that have, I think, put us on the map, so to speak, but more so from their talents than anything we've done.

But I think every player that comes into the NBA is going to be excited on draft night for whatever team they go to. We want the people that really will be excited and want to be with the Thunder. That's the thing that matters the most to us.

Q. Obviously you have a ton of first-round draft picks logged for the next several years. I guess my question is you don't know where those picks are going to be. You don't have any control of that. But is part of logging that many first-round picks a way of gaining some control over this completely random process by giving yourself possibly more cracks at it?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I mean, I think that's one way to look at it. It's optionality, right, so draft picks are currency in the NBA. I think they're valuable in the sense that they can be used in a lot of different ways.

I don't know that we're going to draft every single draft pick that we have for the next several years, but they're spaced out. We don't have 20 in one year. We have them spaced out over a long period of time, and they can be used in trades. I'd like to think if we get to a certain point in time where the team has declared itself and given us some ideas on where we might be able to add to it or supplement it, we'll have the resources to be able to do that.

If you look at the trades that have been made over the last say even two years that have involved draft compensation, there's some pretty good players that have been able to be acquired via that way. It's not always just the star player that gets hauled in with draft picks. Usually that's not enough.

But you can definitely add quality players to your team, and over the course of times, we'll look for different ways that

we can use our assets, and yeah, I think having more definitely hopefully lowers the floor on nights when you may have something very random not go your way.

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