

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti Will Dawkins Press Conference



SAM PRESTI: First want to thank everybody for staying. These obviously are late nights, and I appreciate everybody staying here for this portion of the program.

Want to start by just thanking everybody involved with the process for us with the Thunder. It's a huge group of people that allow us to prepare for the draft every year. Tomorrow morning we're going to get together, rehash this, and start preparing for next year. It's an ongoing process, but it's impossible without the tremendous people that we have working in the scouting department, medical department, all the different areas.

Just wanted to start out by saying that around the lottery, I mentioned that there's three stages to kind of player acquisition relative to the draft: One, figuring out where you're going to be picking; two, actually selecting players; and then three, developing the players that you select.

Obviously the third stage is the longest stage, and that's the stage that we're going to embark on tomorrow.

Those things take a long time. I think we saw at the end of last season kind of how we ended up, not talking about last season, the season before. You got to the end of this season, this past season, and the team looked a lot different.

We're going to start the upcoming season, we're going to play that season out, and we're going to see where everybody is in their development curve. But when you think about the strides that Josh Giddey made from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, same with Trey and Jeremiah and Wiggins, that's the same process that we're going to embark on with these four individuals.

The other thing I want to note is that I think tonight was an example of us to begin to layer some continuity on to the team. I think that's really important in terms of building sustainability. You have to have continuity.

I think starting to build a group of guys that compete together, that go through different experiences together, that are learning together from the trials and successes that it takes to be a really good team one day is important.

This is, I think, the first time we can honestly say that we're going to have some continuity and we're going to continue to layer on to that, and that's key to sustainability, which is obviously our goal over the course of time.

Lastly, I think relative to the development piece, I think there's a big difference between picking players and assembling a team. Assembling a team takes a lot of different people working together, namely the coaches and the players, and all the things that make great teams function, they don't happen on draft night or a series of drafts.

It happens, like I said before, during the development cycle of individuals. But really as I said at the end of the season, the development of a team as a whole is really the thing that we're after more than anything.

I'm going to turn it over to Will. He'll go over some thoughts about the guys and then we'll open it up for questions.

WILL DAWKINS: Thanks, Sam. Draft night is always a fun night. Each one is unique and different, and I want to say what Sam said. It really takes everybody in the organization to pull off a night like this, especially the evaluation group.

There's a lot of sacrifices for your family and time away and travel, and we don't take that for granted. So from the amateur group with Brandon Miller and Ryan Lambert leading the show making sure we know where to be, who to see all year long.

Even down to now we're leaving and Nazr Muhammad and Brandon Barnett are working on a Summer League roster. So it's like a full night that you truly don't get to see and enjoy too often, so we're excited with that.

When you get the chance to add four guys in the draft like tonight who are going to be beginning their careers and starting their development, you look first at them as people, and we're excited to get them in, the type of guys that they



are, and we expect them to come in and compete, work hard, get their self going, and be excited to be a part of the group that we have here.

So we're looking forward to getting them in and starting as soon as we can.

Q. Can you just first tell us about what stood out with Chet and why did you decide to go with him with the No. 2 pick?

SAM PRESTI: I'll let Will talk about the specifics of Chet's game. I would just say we were pretty comfortable with just the idea of him blending with the group that we have. I think there's some really, really good players at the top of this draft. It's a really, really good draft. I think the draft as a whole -- the last two drafts have been really good.

But we thought he was the person for Oklahoma City. He was the person for the Thunder. We're really excited about the chance to add him. Do you want to talk about his game?

WILL DAWKINS: Yeah, sure. Fortunately we were able to see Chet a few years ago, probably three years ago at different events in the summertime, and you get to see in situations outside of Gonzaga, and you start to learn him and grow and develop and things of that nature.

And with Chet, the size that you have with the ball handling, the passing, decision making at that size, you don't see too often. But he's also a two-way player and can protect the rim and defend, and he's a guy who's going to come in here and compete.

He's unselfish. He's going to compete with his teammates. He's sacrificed to be on a good team, and kind of did that willingly going in as one of the top players in high school. Wanted to join a good team and be about winning, and those are some of the things that really appeal to you when you talk about Chet the game.

But the person, when you get around him and you get a feel for his fiber, who he is as person, how is he going to come in here and represent our organization, you feel really good about that at the top of the draft.

Q. I want to go back to the draft lottery. You were in the room with all the other executives, reportedly, I don't know if it's true or not, you guys couldn't have your phones. What was the moment like when you guys received the second pick? Did you give yourself a little fist bump? Did you try to high five the other executives?

SAM PRESTI: No, that's the reason I did the media in advance of going in the room, because like I've said before, we can't take credit for things that are just good fortune. We were very fortunate that the way that the lottery went, positioned us at No. 2.

I don't think you can react to it in a way that -- like you're owning that. It happened to go our way. The year before it didn't go our way, but I still felt like we had a really good night. Know what I mean? We got Josh.

So that's why I think honestly that the thing about the NBA, and I've talked about this a lot, is a lot of it's good fortune. A lot of it's opportunity, a lot of it's things kind of have to come together, and we were very fortunate.

But like I said, that was the second stage. That was us learning where we were picking. But the third stage and the most important stage is the development of the players.

Just because a player does well here doesn't mean they would do well somewhere else or vice versa, and I think sometimes that part of it gets underappreciated.

I understand people will just say, okay, well, this person did well here, but it doesn't work like that. If you think about it for yourself and your job, just because you're successful -- just because you're in one place doesn't mean if you went somewhere else as a writer or reporter you couldn't be more successful.

So much of it is environment, opportunity, the situation that's been set up. All that stuff makes a difference.

It's convenient to look back on it and be like, oh, it should have gone this way, it should have gone that way. But you have to put everyone in those situations to know if it really would.

For me it was, hey, look -- I was excited, but at the same time I was like, that's just random. Now we've got to pick somebody and we've got to help them become the best player they can be?

Q. You entered the draft with two lottery picks and you walked away making three selections in the lottery. Just want to get your thoughts on how the night transpired from that perspective?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we feel pretty fortunate to add the players that we added. We also feel fortunate to do the trade that we did with Denver that got announced tonight.

So tomorrow morning kind of sit back, and I think kind of let it -- kind of see it all.

But we're thrilled with the outcome. Like I said at the end of the season, I do think that the improvement from our team is going to come from the existing players.

I think that the group that we're bringing in tonight is going to come in, learn what it means to be a Thunder player. I'm extremely confident that those guys are going to be excellent in that fashion.

But we also need the continued improvement from the existing team that we have. I think the team on paper is improving from year to year, but this is just our second draft.

These types of builds take time, and we're going to just keep chomping away at it.

Q. I wanted to ask you, Will, what stood out about Dieng at that No. 11 spot that made him a target for you guys?

WILL DAWKINS: Yeah, I give our scouts a lot of credit to identify guys early. The one thing that Sam is really good about is he sets a vision, and we find a way to kind of go through and work as a group to kind of make sure that happens.

But Sam gets a lot of credit for that, but I think what goes unnoticed at time is how much Sam actually puts the work in. He's in the big gyms, he's in the small gyms, he's in the international gyms, he's in the future player gyms.

Sam was one of the first people with our scout Massimo Biasin who was in France seeing him early when he was 16. So he gets to see him when he was younger, gets eyes on him and kind of sets the tone from there.

We've seen him for a while. Obviously when he was playing in Australia. We sent people over there to see him as well. When you see him grow from 6'3" to 6'10" and he keeps the ball handling with him and keeps the passing, the vision, the shooting, the competitiveness on the floor, the two-way ability, you kind of get excited about those guys early, and then when they maintain it.

Similar to last year when Josh, and when you play with grown men in that league you can kind of see how they're doing, and he started rough but kept fighting, persevered, and finished the season a different player.

We're excited he kind of went through that and had to go through that and persevered through that and showed that resiliency, so it's hard not to get excited when you see guys like that.

SAM PRESTI: He looked a lot different at 16. I would also add that we know a lot of people that have played with him over the course of time. The way they speak about him as a person, especially when -- as a 19 year old player you're in a foreign country and playing against grown men, and it's not being handed to you.

Just his work ethic and the way he responded, it's not going to get easier. He's going to have to keep battling, but he does have a unique set of skills, and I think he's got a good disposition.

Q. Have you thought about how you're going to classify between Jalen Williams and Jaylin Williams?

SAM PRESTI: We haven't really talked about that yet. We'll have to -- that's something for tomorrow.

WILL DAWKINS: Someone is going to get a nickname really quickly. That's my guess.

SAM PRESTI: But we did have to distinguish quickly because they were both players we were really fond of, and we had to determine Jalen Williams Arkansas or Jaylin Williams Santa Clara. So, yeah, so that was a first.

Q. I know you already talked about Chet Holmgren, but what was it specifically that put him above Jabari Smith and Paolo Banchero in your minds?

SAM PRESTI: Well, again, I think the top of the draft is -- this is a great one. I think the drafts are in my experience improving and getting better year by year. I think a lot of it's just because the players are coming in so much more skilled than they were even five or six years ago.

I think a big part of that is some of the current stars of the NBA and the way they play has had a huge influence on the younger generation of basketball players. Steph Curry being probably chief amongst that group of people.

I do think it's had a real trickle-down effect to just the quality of the drafts. I really do believe that.

I mean, Chet for us was the best person for us. I think he'll meld into what we're doing, and I think he's clear in his mind this is a great place for him and for him to continue to grow as a player.

I've talked to him about this this evening and have talked about it even when we were spending time together, that, like I said about Ousmane, it gets harder from here and it's not going to go smooth. But it didn't go smooth for any young player that we've ever had here.

It's going to be some starts and stops. There's going to be some tough nights. There's going to be some great nights. But we're not looking at this in terms of like a one-year increment. We're looking at, like I said before, we want to have a long run of sustained success that's going to take some time to get to that point. We think he's a critical part to it, but we're going to have to put him in positions to be successful.

I'm very confident he'll be ready, willing and able to put in all the work. That's one of the things about him that was really attractive.

Q. You mentioned about playing against grown men. Chet is a really slightly built guy. Does that concern you at all? Obviously you made him your second pick, but him being ready to handle that kind of physicality right away?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I mean, look, it's an adjustment for every player in the NBA. It doesn't really matter. He has the benefit of having just a very unique reach and wingspan. He's competed against his peer group with the same attributes and has played up against some of the better guys at the top of the draft the last few years as a young prep player.

He's going to have to adjust and learn just like any player, but I think he's unique, and if you really think about some of the best players in the NBA, and I'm not saying that he is or will be, but I think sometimes unique is beneficial, and I think some of the things that make him unique can be leveraged and utilized.

But it's going to be a process. He has to figure out and we have to figure out how to set up situations for him to be successful.

Q. In terms of Jalen Williams or rather Santa Clara's Jalen Williams, he's a little older than the rest of the guys and I think it kind of shows in interviews. What did you guys like about him?

SAM PRESTI: Gosh, there's a lot. He's just a really natural basketball player. He can do a lot of different things. He's got good size, tremendous length. I think he can play pretty much anywhere on the floor. I like his -- he's a real thoughtful player. I think he really understands what's going on on the floor and he can play with or without the ball. I think there's a lot there.

Again, it's going to be a process for him just like any other young player, but I just think he's a player that fits well with the group in terms of who and all the different combinations

that he can play with of our existing team, pretty unique in that way. Pretty serious.

I think all these guys are serious about their job, serious about their craft, and I think that bodes well -- that complements kind of the group we brought in last year. Those guys were -- I mean, JRE, Wiggins, Trey, Josh, those guys are all business right now in the off-season. They're going to be better players when we tip off next year, and it's because of how serious they've taken things.

I think this group has a chance to, but that first group we had when we started in our first draft with this, they've set the bar high for the summer. They're working. I'm excited to see just kind of how the group comes together. I really am.

WILL DAWKINS: The only thing I would add on Jalen Williams Santa Clara would be the person that he is. Nothing was given to him. He's worked, he's earned it, comes from a very regimented Air Force background family, and he's serious about his work.

He didn't have the season he wanted as a sophomore and kind of went back at it, adjusted some things, became that efficient player.

Again, he was another guy who was six feet, grew six inches, took some time to grow into his body, grow into his game, but kept working and kept competing. You watch him at the combine, he's competing in those drills, not sitting that out, playing both games.

We really liked that about him, so there is a positive chip on his shoulder and a mindset with a player like him that we think fits well with our program and the guys we have, along with being able to be efficient and play with the ball, play off the ball, and the things that Sam talked about.

Q. You talked about seeing Chet a few years ago, Dieng a few years ago, and I believe Josh you saw a couple years before he got drafted. How valuable is it to see guys before they mature into college players or international players?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I just think it's a baseline. It gives you kind of a baseline. Guys change so much. But yeah, it's just a baseline, if anything, so you can watch kind of where they go from there.

One thing that I think you kind of learn about people early is their competitive level, how they handle themselves with teammates. Their game changes, but the person, that's pretty consistent.

Any look we can get at somebody, we're going to want to try to track them because every year there's 60 new players. This year there are 58, but that's another story. But there's 58, 60 new players that come into the league, and we're not expanding the rosters. That's what the draft is.

That's the lifeblood of the NBA is the draft. That's how the league changes, and everybody that you see that's playing on TV, on national TV and has their face on the commercials and stuff, they were high school players, college players or international players, and they were drafted, and it didn't happen quickly for anybody like that nowadays.

Getting a chance to see them early on I think is important.

Q. I know last year the team showed a lot of promise, had a lot of talented guys. How competitive do you think this team could be this year? I know you're still focusing on development, but how competitive do you think the team can be?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, like I've said every year that I've been here, from 2008 onward, I would never place a limitation on the group that we have any year.

We don't come into any season with preconceived notions about, okay, this is how it's going to go. We always let the season unfold and see where we are. But we measure everything by the progress we make from where we start, and it's been like that for years.

That's just how we do things. We're very much more focused on process than outcome. That doesn't mean we don't care about the outcomes, but we believe firmly that process is what drives outcomes.

We have to start from square one. We had a top 10 defense for a large portion of the year last year, but we don't get to start with a great defensive rating. We're going to start where everybody else is.

That's why I think I've mentioned so many times that a lot of the improvement that we're going to see as a team is going to come down from the existing group, and I think one of the benefits will be the continuity that that existing group has. Now we're able to layer another draft class on.

Now you're starting to see how -- there's a difference, as I said, between picking players and assembling a team. Assembling a team takes a lot of time because you have to go through experiences, you have to see where your shortcomings are, or learn about where our limitations are as a team, who fits together, like where the best

combinations are. Going through that is going to determine how competitive we are.

Now, one thing I'm very confident in is -- and because of the last two years specifically, is our guys play hard. That's been the case for the last two years. We may not have had the outcomes that we want, but we came back from all those deficits last year.

I think we had 15 -- we were I think seven or eight come-from-behind wins for 15 or more. I think we competed, and that's how you've seen the players develop and improvement. That's got to be the number one thing, and then the other thing is we've got to be more physical, and that's another aspect. I said that at the end of the season, that we have to be competitive night in and night out but we also have to add a level of physicality to our approach, and that doesn't mean everybody has to look like Lu Dort or Jaylin Williams Arkansas.

But sure, their parents are going to love the fact that we're using their college after we say their name. But you don't have to look like that or play like that, but everyone can be physical in their own right, and I think that's going to be important.

There's going to be competition on the roster, which is healthy and good. I think that's only going to make the players that we have on the team better and will make the team better. It gives Mark more options.

We'll be the team we're supposed to be. I'm confident in that, because that's the mentality of the organization, and we'll see where that leads us, and then we'll do it again the following year.

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