

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti

Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: How's everybody doing?

Before we get started, when we do these availabilities, they serve a lot of different purposes for us. I always want to use them as an opportunity to communicate with our fans, sponsors, community, everybody, in addition to the job you guys have to do, and you guys are critically important as well.

So what I'd like to do is use the first part to talk about the things that are top of mind in terms of, for me, that I'd like to communicate to the fans and to the community, and then we'll get to all your questions. Hopefully I'll cover some of the things you'd be interested in and the things I want to talk to the fans about and our city and all our partners.

Hopefully, from there, we'll have a great conversation and make it conversational and not just like a volley back and forth. You guys always do a great job asking good questions.

The things I want to kind of cover off the top that I think are important organizationally to communicate about is this is kind of a unique press conference in that it's our 15th season in Oklahoma City as the Thunder. We're extremely, extremely grateful for the 15 years that we've had, the players that we've had past and present, all of our staff that we've had past and present, our community support, our fans, the civic leadership, everybody that it takes to create a basketball team from scratch.

Looking back over those -- well, the last 14 years as we head into 15, it's been a remarkable journey. 11 of those 14 years, we had an 11-year run where we had the second best record in the NBA, the fourth best record in all of pro sports cumulatively, and we've been to the postseason 10 out of those 14 years, and that doesn't happen without tremendous cooperation, partnership, collaboration, persistence.

And it's not just the organization. It's the community and all the people around it that help support the team. So I think



it's really important to recognize that.

At the same time, you reflect back. You only have one 15th anniversary, but when I think back to where we started in 2008, we were looking up a pretty steep mountain. We didn't have a team name. We had no uniforms. Some would argue we didn't have much of a team at the time. We didn't really have pens or pencils.

But we climbed the mountain. We fought it as long as we could. We stayed up there for a long time. We had, like I said, a pretty good run of sustained success, and now we're facing another climb.

It's equally as rare. It's a pretty rare situation where you start -- (Video glitched.)

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that we had some season ticket members with us since the first year, and hopefully longer as well. I can't remember every single person, but I kind of randomly picked five families I want to acknowledge just because I think it's important to do that as a representative.

So we want to thank the Adler family, the bridges family, the Fraley family, the Moore family, the Ryder family, and the Zorn family as representatives of the fact that these people have been season ticket holders for 14 years, going on 15 years now. Like I said before, it really takes everybody to be able to do that type of thing.

The challenge we have in front of us now, as I said before, the second climb, so to speak, is unique because it's a totally different era. It's a totally different era of basketball. It's a totally different era in terms of the industry.

We're still the third smallest market, but we also are in a time where the things that were commonplace or conventional years ago would probably seem unconventional now. It's just a different time, which makes it a totally unique challenge and a different challenge for us.

It's also easy to forget that just two years ago we were still on the mountain, you know, before we had descended to start the second climb, and we're obviously very early in that. But two years ago Shai, Lu, Baz, those guys were playing meaningful minutes in the bubble.

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It's been a remarkable 14 years when you think about all the things that we kind of accomplished within it.

As far as this season goes, I think we have a pretty wide bandwidth in terms of the potential outcomes of the team. We project to be probably about the second youngest team in the history of the NBA, second only to last year's Thunder team. (Laughter).

When you have an older team or maybe a team that has more track record, whether it's good or bad, your bandwidth is shorter. You can predict those types of outcomes easier because there's more known. There also is probably a little bit more of a cap on the potential of the team because of those things being more known, and the floor might be a little bit different as well.

But our age and relative inexperience is absolutely going to be a positive for the team over a long period of time because inexperience will turn to experience, and our guys will get older and better as time goes on.

But that's the beauty of watching any team, any young team in pro sports is you're actually watching it kind of evolve in front of you. I don't think anybody would say that we're not a work in progress. At the same time, I think we're a better team than we were at this startup time last year. And we're going to be a better team at the end of this season, absolutely, because of the fact we have some very young players that are going to continually improve.

So our age gives us the potential to recognize the high side of our bandwidth. Our age also gives us the potential to recognize the down side. In order to kind of be scaleable and make sure the team continues to improve year after year, we have to have a standard of play.

Last year, we talked in this setting about a baseline. That was a big thing. This year, I think we want to try to establish what those standards would be for us so we could measure progress on our own internal scorecard. That starts with preparation, competing physically, mentally, and emotionally. That sounds easy. It's extremely hard for professional athletes to do that on a consistent basis year to year, and especially younger teams.

We have to play physical. I mentioned that at the end of last season as well. That's not a trait that's commonly associated with younger teams. We have to be committed to a style of play that doesn't just work for one year but can be scaled and adapted and modified as time goes on and as we add new players and our existing players continue to evolve and improve.

And we can't seek shortcuts that are actually setbacks in waiting. I think that's the challenge of any type of building process -- in your own lives, in our own lives, in work or in business, whatever it might be. Shortcuts that lead you to setbacks that are kind of just latent and waiting there, that's what we want to actively try to avoid.

Now, if we want to recognize the potential of the team now and in the future, we also have to overcome the common distractions that generally young teams have to confront at some point in their evolution. So, for instance, young teams -- and I don't think our -- I think our guys are spot on with this stuff, but I think that we have to be cognizant that these are generally the things that are headwinds for younger teams in sports, but especially the NBA.

Not seeing the season as a process, but seeing it as a day-to-day judgment, that is going to create -- that's going to slow progress. You just have to see the season as a bit of a marathon or a test.

Getting overly concerned with statistics and accomplishments, everybody has personal ambitions. That's great. You need to have that. How does that fit within the framework of the team? That's another thing that's pretty common.

Communication internally. A lot of times, younger teams, they don't communicate with each other because they're not that comfortable yet. It usually happens as you get older. Remember we've got young people, and a lot of times they communicate with people that aren't with the team, and those people's incentive may not be what's best for the team.

So those are common things that happen in all walks of life, and the NBA is no different than that.

Letting other people set the agenda for what's important or what the priorities should be or what the outlook should be, that's another common threshold that every young team has to face at one point or another.

And just the general wanting to skip steps that are necessary to go through in order to get to the goals that you want to ultimately achieve.

So for us, like I said before, to punch above our weight, a lot of that comes down to what the priorities are, what are we disciplined in how we're stacking our priorities?

We're going to learn those things over time because every young team hits that. Do you want to skin your knee, bang your head, and then learn it? Or can we be intentional,

building that into our mindset that these are normal things that you have to confront? Every young team is going to face that.

Essentially, what I'm saying is our pace of learning and maturity has to outpace our experience and our age. And that's why I think that's the great thing about our team. I think we're talented, but I think a lot of times people feel that younger teams have a hard time winning, but they don't identify the reasons why.

Part of the reasons why is these are things that generally people learn later on in their careers, and that's why the older teams -- when they say veteran teams, they're not just talking about older teams. They're talking about understanding some of the things we're talking about.

So we want to be really intentional about talking and putting those things in front of us because that can really help our team reach the potential that they have for the current season.

The West is going to do that on its own anyway because the West is so tough. Much has been made about our schedule, and it's the toughest schedule. It is, but it's also going to make us better because we have to go out there every single night and compete against the best teams in the league. I think that's actually going to do us a lot of favors in terms of our progress, as long as we have that baseline that we talked about and we're able to observe the season as a whole, which I think we will.

The other thing about accelerating beyond our age and our experience is something that every team has to deal with is there's going to be predictable distractions that happen in every season. That's in the modern NBA. That's in the modern world that we live in today. Whether it's -- you guys heard me talk about social media. Social media is great. It's got so many positive things, but it really has nothing to do with winning basketball games. If anything, it's probably more directed towards luring you away from that -- not intentionally. Not intentionally. But there's a business that is being conducted there, and we have a business that we're conducting here.

Part of being a really good NBA team is being able to perform without necessarily getting distracted by that. The sooner a young team -- this is, again, my opinion -- can understand that that's not a penalty, those distractions, that's the price of admission. The price of admission for being an NBA player, for being a professional athlete, for being an NBA team. This is not a penalty. This is what you have to overcome and have to deal with, and you still have to perform at a high level.

Once the team realizes that, that's a test of their maturity and discipline to be able to separate those things. Again, older teams do a pretty good job with that, and that's one of the reasons why their performance is more consistent.

There's going to be distractions, and there's going to be things that you have to block out. That doesn't mean they're all bad. It just means they're not necessarily all driving towards your goals. So a lot of that is focus on priorities.

Now, I also think we have a pretty long runway with this particular team. Shai is just entering his -- what do we call it? Pre-prime years. Josh, Chet, some of the other guys we have, are still a few years away from getting to that point. But at some point here in the near future, you're going to have those tenures overlap, so to speak, and that's extremely exciting when you think about the progress that the guys have made. Even this summer, when you see some of the players physically at Media Day, without them even touching a basketball, you'll see that these guys really are young and they can improve rapidly physically.

It's really exciting to think about, wait, when we get a few of these core guys all kind of overlapping during their prime years, we could have a lot of fun with that. That doesn't mean we can't be successful and win a bunch of games in the near term as well, but we're working towards that period of time where those guys are overlapping. And when they do, if we prepare physically, mentally, and emotionally and we have these things prioritized, like I talked about, I think we have a chance to be pretty good.

Now, unless something like the CBA or something we're not aware of disrupts kind of the infrastructure, we should have the team in a good position based on how the contracts are aligned and the ages of the team, and we should be able to continually come back year after year and say, hey, I think we're going to be better. Part of that's just going to be dealing with the adversities that we deal with and also managing the successes that we have.

A lot's been made about the schedule. I talked to you about that. As far as this season goes, nobody knows how a season's going to go. I know people have tried to put a number on the games that Chet would cost us. I would say save your predictions, burn your assumptions. I don't know what good that really does.

At the end of the day, there's no facts about the future. There's only opinions, and that's fine. I'm just really happy that I don't have to be in a position like you guys to make predictions about things that everyone knows.

Number one, nobody never really knows. Number two,



you don't have a clue. I don't really have a clue either.

Last year, they thought we were going to win nine games. When we had C.P. and Gallo, I think they thought that. You have to let the season play out. I've done this for 20-something years now. Predicting the future is not in my wheelhouse, and you have to let the season play out because you never know -- it's not just your season you're predicting. You're also predicting 29 other teams' seasons.

So I don't know how it will go, but I know there have been a lot of years where people have said this is what's going to happen, and the first ten games they're running from those predictions. So let's wait for it to play out before we decide this is what it's going to be because I really don't have an idea. Because you have a young team, as I said before, if we prioritize those things, we'll punch above our weight. I'm pretty sure about that.

We had a top ten defense last year for a lot of the season. Does that mean we'll have a top ten defense this year? No. We have to go back to zero and learn those lessons, not let other things block in. But we're also not playing other teams either. The other teams are different. The deck gets shuffled every year, including our own.

When we get back to the postseason, it's not going to happen because of one season. It's not going to be a this is the year that did it. If it happens this season, it won't be because of what happens between now and the postseason. It will happen because of a series of seasons. That's the way things always occur.

At the time, things seem -- they seem arduous, they seem far-reaching, but it's always a series of seasons that adds up. What we're looking for is overall improvement over a long period of time. That's not the most sexy, exciting thing that I could say to you, but it's more persuasive to create this illusion of control than creates the reality of uncertainty.

So that's not what we're trying to do. I'm not trying to mislead anybody, but it would be easy to find something that's more catchy and exciting, but we just want long term, overall improvement. That doesn't mean every season is going to go the same way.

Basketball teams are not like something you wind up mechanically and they just go on like a metronome. It's not a Craft Work song, and I like Craft Work. I think they're hugely, hugely important to modern music, but it's very, very syncopated, right? It's not something that Steve Gadd is playing or Jeff Porcaro is playing or Bernard Purdie is playing. It's very, very mechanical. There's no feel in that.

That's not how people or teams work. There's going to be

a lag or sometimes it goes faster. Over time, when we have more years where we feel like we make progress than we don't -- and for us, progress is dictated by where we start and where we finished.

Last year, we were coming into camp. You guys had a lot of questions about Josh Giddey. You saw him play five minutes in summer league, and there were significant concerns over those five minutes, and we were projecting those five minutes over the next 15 years. By the end of the season, we had more information.

Tre Mann, Aaron Wiggins, Jeremiah, they were total unknowns. By the end of the season, we had a chance to say, hey, these guys might be part of the team that climbs that second mountain. We don't know that for sure. There's a lot of competition for those 17 spots. But we just added another group of guys, and we'll have more information about them in the future as well.

So progress for us, it's all about the terrain in which you have to cover from where you're starting. I think we're going to make progress this year. I'm pretty confident that we will. Based on what we've seen so far, based on my belief in the coaching staff, based on how I've seen the players, the mentality of the players, because your mentality and your mindset creates your reality. I really, really feel good about that.

In the years that you get some tough things that come your way, like Chet's injury, you have to keep going. You just can't give into that. You have to continue to follow through on the mindset that, yep, over a long period of time, we want to have more years, more good years than not.

As far as Chet, I also want to say that the thing we probably lose more than anything -- because I think developmentally I'm not concerned about that. I think having a year to learn the league, to experience the cadence of the league, to work on his body, to understand the personnel in the league and all the different schemes, I think that's going to be actually extremely beneficial.

The area where we probably lose the most is tactically being able to see him and how he interacts with the core of the rest of the guys. We just won't get that exposure. I can't sugarcoat that for anybody. I want you guys to always look at me and say he's telling us what he really thinks. This is what I really think. This is a bit of a big setback for us tactically because we're not going to see that.

I don't think it will be developmentally, and I also think that the team will absolutely figure out and morph into a lot of different things we wouldn't have otherwise had the

opportunity to see if Chet was playing. Obviously, it would be better if he was. But the fact that he isn't, I don't think is like, self-limiting. I think it's limiting in that we won't get to see kind of the interaction, but we're going to. We're going to get to that. We're just going to go a year without that, which is how sports goes.

Just a few more things, and I'll get to all your questions.

I think, in general, people are, including myself, including everybody here in the organization, nobody is really good at identifying the time it takes to reach your aspirations. So we say, okay, how long does it take to get to Philadelphia if we drive? Everyone in here would give an answer, and it would probably be wrong, unless you looked at your phone, which would be cheating in that case.

The other thing is I think everybody always underestimates how hard things are that they want to do. I want to lose 15 pounds. When you really do it, it's easy to say, but it's hard to do. In the words of the Thunder philosopher Royal Ivey, easy to say is hard to do. That's another great thing for the young team. Blind spots, we talked about. Easy to say is hard to do. That was why we had Roy here, you know. And Perk had, you can't get bored with the process. So those guys, they're scholars of Thunder University.

What I was saying about people are bad at predicting things in general, the other thing is any form of resistance is seen as catastrophic. So when you set your goal or you predict your time, when you run into any resistance or headwind, it's the end of the world because, to start with, you're probably wrong to even be predicting things instead of just putting one foot in front of the other to solve problems the way it's most effective too.

And remember it's supposed to be challenging and difficult no matter what, and that's another thing I think, for us, we talk about internally, which is we live in a world of immediate convenience. People don't even go to the grocery store anymore. They don't want to sit in a line. You want to order a pair of shoes, you don't even have to go to the store. You just hit a button.

It creates like a comfort crisis because then, when you actually have to do something for yourself, it seems like you're being asked to climb Everest.

In our path, in what we're doing, in order to really enjoy the best parts, you have to have some actual discomfort on the hard parts because that's what's going to allow you to enjoy the other parts even more. It makes it sweeter when you're not just accustomed to everything being laid out perfectly for you.

So we're heading into another season. There'll be plenty of adversities, but there's going to be plenty of great moments. We're not going to hit a button and make it easy for everybody. We can't do that. We're not going to wrap everybody in bubble tape and shield them from difficulties because I think that's what's going to make getting to the top of the second mountain of sustainable success even that much more meaningful, and I'd say that to our fans as well.

It's like having kids in the back seat of your car driving somewhere. When are we going to get there? We would all laugh about that because the answer is I don't know. I don't have an idea. We're going to Philly. I don't know how long it takes. Now you can look at your phone and say exactly this, but you don't want to tell your kids that. It just means they're going to scream and yell even longer. I speak from experience on that.

Then you can threaten you're going to take the car to the side of the road, but you know you're not going to do that because it's going to make even longer for them to scream and yell in the back.

What I'm trying to say is there's a mature way you go through problem solving, and there's an immature way you go through problem solving. The car ride, I think, is a good example of the struggle we all have with convenience and ease in the world we live in today. We're not trying to make it convenient because I think that's going to limit our potential. When you adjust your path, you're limiting your potential.

At the same time, we can't tell you exactly what's going to happen, but I would rather aspire for something like a second mountain, a sustained stay on that, than just speeding myself to a situation that could otherwise be avoided with patience.

This is the last point I want to make. I think this is one of the more representative Thunder teams that we've had. And the reason I say that is we've talked a lot about the city, the state, the fact that we pull a lot from the values of the city and the state to try to build and sustain our organization.

And on this particular group, there's a lot of underdogs with this particular group. There's a lot of commitment with this particular group. There's loyalty with this particular group, and there's resilience.

The commitment is we've had guys working their tails off all summer all over the world. In a gym near you, there's been a Thunder player that has been crushing it.

Loyalty. Shai, he made a long-term commitment here. Lu, he's made a long-term commitment here. Mike Muscala, Kenrich Williams, I think that is appreciated in our community because they're not just basketball players here. They're also people of the population, people of the city and the state.

The resilience within the team, I think the team has been extraordinarily resilient. I think Mark deserves a ton of credit for that, as well as just the character of the guys. They've battled. They've fought. A lot of them, that's how they've gotten to the place that they are. Not every single one of them has been handed an NBA career on a silver platter. They've all had to overcome something.

We've got guys that are too skinny. We have guys that don't have a position. We have guys that weren't drafted. And to me, that's what makes the team very representative. Like, great, that's what we're trying to morph into something that can be really special for the city and the team and that relationship.

I think that's one of the reasons why being a Thunder fan right now -- I always talk about the fans that bleed blue. Being on that journey, seeing these characteristics within the team that you're supporting and riding with that team, that to me is -- that's what I want for people.

Like I was walking through the airport the other day, and I was just walking, and someone yelled from behind me, Thunder Up! God, that made me feel good. It made me feel really good. What it made me feel is God, I want this -- I really want the people here to experience like another postseason.

I was at Pearl Jam the other night, and I was looking out at the crowd and how full it was and how just people are on their feet. Like there's something about that type of energy in the city that's just awesome. And when we get there, it's going to be not because we took the path -- you know, the easiest path. It's because we did it organically. There's going to be 17 guys that have fought their ass off to have a spot on that team, and it's getting harder because the team's getting better.

A few years ago, we were just looking for NBA players. We're two seasons in, and we're going to cut NBA players from our team that aren't going to make the team because you don't have enough spots.

So when we climb the second mountain, there's a lot of guys that want to be part of that team that scales it, that's part of those catalyst moments that get there, and I know -- and I can speak for everybody in this building -- we're going to work as hard as we can, but we're not going to

watch the clock. We're going to be pace setters on that because it's going to make it more meaningful when we get there.

I'm just really grateful. Like I said, I started with some of these names, the Adlers and the Zorns. We're working for them. We want them to have the same thing that we want to have. I think that's important in a small city like this.

The journey continues in year 15, and when we get to year 20, we'll look back, year 25. But the first 15 years, we smashed a lot in there, and it's been a great ride. We're excited for the next 15.

I'll try to get to every question you guys have. I'll try to make it a discussion as much as we can in these settings. I appreciate you hearing me out so I can speak directly to the people and to the people that don't have a seat in this specific room that I don't get to communicate with directly as much as I would like to.

Q. Do you expect Shai to be ready by the start of the season?

SAM PRESTI: I don't know the answer to that just because the injury just happened, everybody's body is different. We could go online, and we could say this is how long it takes to get this. That's on the average person, right?

So, yeah, the average -- no pun intended, the average Joe -- there's nothing average about you. You're an elite performer (laughter). But your MCL is very average (laughter). So the average MCL, if we're looking online, that's the average person. This is a pristine professional athlete. He uses that MCL for his career, and he needs it to be as good a player as he's going to be.

He probably has an edge on, like, his health probably heading into it, but he also has to rely on it a lot more than somebody that's on Web MD. So we have to just see what happens, you know, in two weeks how he's looking. We'd love for him to be ready, but we can't make predictions like that because nature is uncooperative.

Q. He's missed pretty significant chunks in each of the last two years. I know all of these injuries seem unrelated, but are there any, like, long-term durability concerns with that?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, all of these injuries seem unrelated, so no.

Q. Can you tell us how he sustained the injury?



SAM PRESTI: Yeah. He was just working out in the gym -- I mean, I wasn't there at the time, but he like just lost his footing for a second, and his knee just kind of like turned inward. He finished the workout. He didn't have any pain at all.

Woke up the next morning and was really stiff so we evaluated him -- fortunately, we're right close to the imaging. So we got him in the MRI and got the read, and that's what we expected it to be. This is just -- I don't think it's a big -- all injuries are important, but I don't think it's a massive deal. I think it's a setback.

I'd rather it happened now than in the middle of the year, obviously. These injuries happen, and guys miss time in the middle of the year. But we'll get through it, and we'll take care of him. It's unfortunate, but we'll be fine.

Q. You talked earlier about performance and progress being about where you start and where you finish. Just curious, as you head into this year but thinking about last year's team, where do you see some progress that that group made kind of heading into this year?

SAM PRESTI: It made a lot, like I said earlier. I think one of the things that -- relative to progress, so much of it is -- and Mark uses the term discovery, which I think is a good terminology because so much of the progress that gets achieved in an NBA year is not intentional. It happens through, like, random things, and you just have to be very observant.

There's a big difference -- again, this is just my point of view. There's a big difference between invention and discovery. Invention is like predetermined, we're going to do this. We're going to play with three point guards, and we're going to -- and one of them's Chris Paul and one of them -- and then there's discovery. Like, wow, this works a little bit. Interesting. We've got to put it out there.

All of the evolution of the game wasn't a result of invention. So much of it is just discovery. Things happen. The only thing we can control, and I think we did last year, is you have to widen the circle of opportunity where you can discover things. You can't just say like, oh, let's be creative. Like that doesn't solve anything, right?

You have to create the conditions where things can happen. You have to put people in situations. You have to try different things. I don't think you can predict that they're all going to work. You just have to have an environment.

I try to foster this with the coaches. Don't be afraid. Don't fear outcomes. If you create a situation where you're going

to try some different thing, that's okay. We have to learn about the players. If we get, like, fixed and predetermined about how this is what this is or these are the nine guys, we are so limiting our potential upside. I would say that even when we had some of the better teams we've had.

We never would have known Reggie Jackson is a pretty good player unless we had an environment where we're looking at the team is good, but could it be better? So you don't do that by predetermining things. You have to kind of set the conditions for discovery.

You can't control what you learn, but you're not walking into it saying we're going to -- Don Nelson didn't say, we're going to change the game by playing all these small players. Or Mike Dantonio, he's like, well, I don't really have a center so I should probably throw this guy in. That's how the game evolves, and it's going to continue to do that.

It's easy to say that like convention only looks unconventional, like, in retrospect. And I think that's the case even with our teams here. The game is totally different than when we were playing years ago. It's easy to take the ideal norms of today and compare it with the past, but it's also like saying -- it's like criticizing Andre Kirilenko for not taking more threes. Like, wait. You're going to criticize Kirilenko for not -- he's a great player of that era. That era did not take as many threes. Does that mean he was not a great player? He was a great player for that era. If he played today, he'd probably play a little bit different, but that's the era. You can't penalize him for that.

We like to do that in society all the time. That's a mistake. You have to understand that progress is going to come each season, and you have to observe it, not judge it. It's hard for people to do. I'm not asking other people not to do that. I'm saying for what we do, you can't judge every day. You have to observe.

Like I said, you want improved performance over a period of time. It's not the sexiest thing in the world, but Warren Buffett's made a lot of money doing it.

Q. Sam, as it relates to Lu, last time we talked to you, it was when rookies were introduced. Sounded like his extension maybe wasn't going to happen. Can you talk us through what did happen and how you guys got to the point where you were able to do that?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. There is a willingness for him to be part of the organization going forward. There is a willingness for the team to want him to be part of the organization.

I'm trying to recount it. It was a while ago. But when you have two mutual interests, a lot of times those things work out. We've done a lot of extensions over the course of time. We've done a lot of -- like a new contract in his case.

But he just wanted to be here, and I think he's going to do great. People forget how young he is because he's been around a little while. He's still getting better. The thing is the easy, low-hanging fruit is going to be is he going to want to have to prove his contract, and is he going to play outside of his identity? That would be, like, the common expectation in the NBA. Those are the things I was saying earlier, right, like the things that are the headwinds.

Yeah, there will probably be some of that in his mind, right? Our job is to explain to him, no, no, no, we need you to be the physical catalyst, the culture catalyst, the competitive catalyst. We don't need you to do more. We need you to do more of what you do well, and a lot of that transcends tactics.

The guy plays every possession, and he's on the floor, and he plays physical. He's still young, so he's getting better. He's going to continue to improve, but his value to the team has already demonstrated that, in my opinion. Now he has to let that bleed into the other teammates he's playing with too in terms of setting that standard of physicality and in competitiveness.

Yeah, it's a tempting thing for any young player to feel like they have to validate things that are coming from the outside, and I think the more mature teams, more mature players, they've learned that through mistakes. I'd like us to learn those things through intention.

I love the group of guys we've got. I love their mentality. I love their makeup. I love their character. When I say these things, it's like just from experience watching the NBA, these are generally things that can -- you learn them eventually. Everyone learns them, but how quickly can you learn them without having to live through the experience of saying, oh, that wasn't good. That's a big thing, I think, for us.

Q. People around the league, us in the media, fans, I assume even front offices around the league are always talking about who the next star is that's going to be available after Donovan Mitchell was dealt this off-season. A lot of people have brought Shai up. I know you don't like addressing speculation, but I would wonder how you would respond to that and how you all view Shai sort of within this organization.

SAM PRESTI: I think the only reason -- the first thing is the only reason we're talking about it is because another

player on another team got traded. And the machine, the aggregation machine is empty now, so we need a little more content.

And I'm not even saying -- like I said, that's the price of admission. It's not a penalty. No one is out to try to disrupt the Thunder or create problems for the Thunder. It's just this is the business we work in. You shouldn't be surprised by that because there needs to be content. It's a business. We need attention. The attention drives advertisements. Advertisements drive salaries, and that's how it works.

We have to be able to perform irrespective of that. So I just think I'm level setting that to say if Donovan Mitchell was not traded already, you wouldn't ask me that question. So therefore, I don't think they're related. You know what I mean? I don't think how we feel about Shai has anything to do with that. You're doing your job. I totally respect it. I've got to do my job and point that out.

We love Shai. He's going to be such a good player. He's got so much room to improve. And he's already really good.

The thing about him is -- I feel this way about the Molson Twins in general, Shai and Lu. They're both -- you can't get long-term results with short-term people. Neither one of them, in my opinion, is a short-term person, and that's the reason why we've made commitments to them that we have, and they're significant commitments.

But they, I think, are trying to be part of that 17 that's there when we start that next run. I think the world of them. I really -- there's so many positive attributes about the guy outside of just being a really good player, but he has a lot of work to do.

So he's been in the playoffs two out of the four years. His first year, he was playing with three point guards, so I think we need to probably go out and find another point guard. I'm surprised no one is, like, why don't you guys have three guys? No one's asking that, but that's because if it was controversial, it would be fill the coffers and everything.

I think he's going to have a great career. He's got the right mindset. He's highly skilled. He has work to do, like I said, but when he's in his prime years and some of the existing corps is physically, emotionally, and mentally in their best years, I think there's a lot to look forward to over a continuous period of time unless something out of our control disrupts. We've had that happen before. My fingers are crossed that's not going to happen. It would be -- I couldn't call it a coincidence, you know what I mean, if it happened again.

I think that in the short term, he's still extremely talented, and so are the other guys. So there's a lot to like look forward to, I guess is what I'm saying with him.

Q. Sam, you've got some roster decisions to make. Does Chet's injury alter that thought process?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a good question. I would say that it's probably a piece of it. I wouldn't weight it heavily. It's probably a small part of it. Like I said in my comments earlier, coming out of the bubble that season where we had a lot of churn -- you know what I mean? We were just we had two weeks to make trades, training camp and all that. We were just trying to find NBA players, like, our roster did not have because we were in this repositioning phase.

Now I'm confident that we're going to end up releasing some guys that are NBA players that I think will go on and play well, depending on situations that they go to, because that's so, so important to the success of players in the league. We're going to have to see how it unfolds.

The one thing is we're never going to go in deterministically and shut off our point of view. Anything can happen. We could experience another injury. I hope that doesn't happen. Trades don't generally get made around this time, but that could happen. Someone could play exceptionally well during camp. That's what competition is.

And the roster construction is certainly a piece of that, but I wouldn't weight that entirely, but we have a lot of options existing on the roster in terms of how we've played that position over the last several years.

The part we're really missing with Chet, like I said before, we're going to lose a year of how does this all work together? Specifically, our most talented players. Because the more you can see it, the quicker you can get to building things out.

Q. How does how players perform in camp affect roster decisions? I know it's just a small sample, and you've got a long history with a lot of these guys, but how much are you weighing how they look heading into the season?

SAM PRESTI: I think when you're having to make decisions like that, this is part of the body of work. So is the previous time you have with them, summer league or the experience you have. Everyone is being evaluated on a body of work. I think it's kind of silly to evaluate people on their worst day or their best day.

I'm going to keep saying it again. You want improved performance over a period of time. I don't think you can

get a snapshot of anybody. People can have the worst day in the world and still be elite at what they do. They can have a great day, and they may not be very good. It's just you've got to see a body of work.

I think that's what we'll do when we get to that stage. Mark, myself, the other people in the front office will sit down and try to figure out what the best decision is there.

Q. You mentioned Chet's injury deterring the team tactically. Does that --

SAM PRESTI: I don't want to say deter. It's like a little limiting.

Q. I couldn't think of the word.

SAM PRESTI: It's not catastrophic. It's just like we're going to miss out on that.

Q. Does that alter any goals that the team had?

SAM PRESTI: No. Because, again -- that's kind of interesting because we don't -- like I said, we're not in the business of predictions. Like we've just done this too long. So the goal is continuous improvement. The goal is creating a style of play that's scaleable so that when he does return, there's more and more corporate knowledge amongst the returning players, if that makes sense, competing physically, mentally, and emotionally on a consistent basis. Those things are absolutely critical. And our pace of learning.

Those things, if we are expert in those areas, we will improve. We'll get better. So I think there's fear in just saying here's what we want to do. We're so much more focused on how we do things than just saying this is what we're going to do.

I think, again, to channel Royal, easy to say is hard to do. Our goals are continuous improvement and not creating -- not taking shortcuts that will ultimately lead to setbacks, like I said earlier, which you can do in the NBA easily.

Q. This is the first off-season in a short while that is somewhat normal. Does it feel that way? If it does, how does it feel to get back to some type of normal?

SAM PRESTI: That's a great question. You absolutely notice the difference. There's no question. I think what we've all been through the last two -- I don't even know. Honestly, I can't even -- I don't know, years. The other thing is my biological clock for 20 years has been based on basketball. People say years. I say seasons. So I don't even know how many years or seasons.

But, like, I was talking to someone from the Heat the other day, and they're like they were so tired at the end of last season. It was like, well, yeah, we played two seasons in a year. I just thought that was hilarious, you know what I mean? We played two seasons in basically a year's time. So did we.

But, yeah, it feels much different. It feels much different. It's also much better for development. I think people are really wanting the season to start. Not that they weren't before, but it's the accumulation, the aggregation of what was going on.

It's not just like the physical toll, but the testing, the bubble. I mean, I can't tell you what that was really like. I mean, I really can't. That was kind of crazy. It had to be done. But looking back on it now, it's wow. I think it just makes you realize how fortunate we had been that we hadn't had those types. In some ways, it's healthy to have those restraints put on you and realize. Makes you value the time that we've had in the off-season.

Q. One of the things that's percolated in the off-season is Mayor Holt talking about the need for a new arena. What's your feeling on that, and what's your sense how the organization will work with the city as they develop timelines and plans and all that sort of thing?

SAM PRESTI: What I can say about that is the first thing that needs to be said is the relationship between the civic leadership here and the organization is uncommon. It's a very -- it's all part of what makes the basketball in Oklahoma City so unique. I've tried to explain that to people in the league and with the other teams and stuff like that. It really is unique. It's a unique place.

Now, part of it is because of how we started 15 years ago when we arrived. That starting point, like from scratch, from nothing, from no logo -- this was nonexistent -- you build relationships, and I think that you also recognize that the mutual value of those relationships. So that's the greatest thing when I hear Mayor Holt speak.

And those relationships will be important as time goes on, but I'm really confident that they'll be a great partnership as there has been since the day we arrived. I like to think part of that is also because we've tried to be a great partner with the community.

I said at the end of my last press conference -- I don't want to say the end, but somewhere in there -- we were pretty limited in what we could do in the community with COVID, and I kind of made a statement like we'll be back out there,

and we have been. This past summer, we've been out there quite a bit, and it's been awesome.

I know that stuff doesn't get covered as much anymore because it happens a lot, and I think that's a good thing because it's normative. But we're in the community almost every day doing something. We got something going -- I think we're unveiling another Thunder Court near Scissortail Park. We've got the book bus recently. Someone sent me pictures of Jalen, J. Will at a Loves with their granddaughter. That's just very unique here, you know what I mean.

That gives me the opportunity to say to J. Will, hey, when we talk about being a Thunder player, this is part of that. Now, a lot of guys that have been here for the last two years haven't had the full 360 experience of what being a Thunder player is because they haven't had the opportunity to be out in the community.

I think that's part of the reciprocity of a relationship. We've always taken it seriously. We want to be representative, and there's a mutual aspiration for what the city can potentially be.

When we arrived here, we had this thematic thing that said rise together. Most of you remember that. Some of you may be too young. But rise together with the city and the team was aspirational to get to the point where we have some of these things.

The thing I love about Mayor Holt is he's maintained that aspiration to strive for having first class things in Oklahoma City. I think that's great.

Q. Do you have a sense of how long something like that could take?

SAM PRESTI: I think when you're in the stages that we're in, I don't even know that there's more than a conversation that is taking place. I think that could go in multiple pathways, and I don't want to speak out of turn. I can only speak to the relationships and my confidence in those.

Q. What impact will Chip Engelland have on this team; just not now, but at least moving forward?

SAM PRESTI: I think Chip is a really special talent and a special person. He, like anyone that is highly skilled, sees things for what they can be and not for what they are. I think he does an excellent job of building relationships that allow people to improve.

That doesn't mean that -- improvement doesn't happen immediately, and part of improvement means you have to

make adjustments to things that you're already doing and you've had a lot of success with. That's a challenge also with a lot of the different people.

A lot of people point to different players he's helped over the years. But like what he did with Tiago Splitter, that didn't happen immediately because you have to try these things, and there might be regression until you get to the point where you get to -- and you need to build up enough tolerance.

He's going to work with a multitude of people, and I think he's only additive to the organization. But his work is, I think, empowering the players to explore their potential, and he does it in a unique way.

Q. Sam, going back to the Pearl Jam concert, what do you think about getting a shout out from Eddie Vetter on stage?

SAM PRESTI: First I'd say -- it was my son's first concert, so I had my son there. He was late to school the next day. It's funny because he told his teacher why he was late to school, and the good thing is she said that she was there too.

(Laughter).

They're great guys. They're great guys. Number one, their sustainability is pretty remarkable. These are guys that have been -- they've been through a lot of different eras. I remember -- dating myself, but the first time I saw -- they did the Unplugged. Remember when Unplugged was like a brand new thing, and they did that Unplugged series?

The first time I saw -- it's probably just my age. I think I was in high school. When they did that, like the intensity and the passion that Eddie Vetter had performing, I was like, man, that's what a real artist looks like.

I remember it just resonated with me, like this guy is totally immersed in this. Like I always remember that. Like it was just so visceral and so like -- it really struck a chord with me.

But the thing that was great is like -- I don't know how many of you were there, but they said some things about the team and how the team was previously -- these guys are huge basketball fans. I've gotten to know them a little bit over time because they're so nice.

But I love the fact the way they talked about that -- they kind of took the temperature down on that topic a little bit, and I do think it's important to recognize also that Seattle is an incredible place. It's an incredible city. They will have a

basketball team again, and I think all of us here are like that's a positive thing. We're hopeful that happens because it's a great place, great fans, and the arena that they've built there, it's spectacular. So when it happens, it's going to be great.

I think everybody here recognizes that's an important thing. That should happen. At the same time, things here for us have been great, and I just give them a lot of credit for the way they handled that.

I think it shows a lot about them, to be honest with you, because I think that's -- because it also gives me a chance to say the things I'm saying now too, which is like Seattle is an awesome place. Great basketball community. And will be again shortly, I think.

Q. Is Lu 100 percent ready to go?

SAM PRESTI: He's doing contact, yeah. When everyone asks me those questions this time of year, I just get a little bit cautious just because between now and -- there's stuff going on right now I don't know about. So if you imagine the Shai thing happening -- let's just say it happened tomorrow, the day after this, the world we live in today is so cynical and so -- you know, it's so rational, the assumption would be that I knew, just wasn't saying.

So there's nothing that I'm aware of that would limit those guys, the guys that we have, other than Shai and Chet at the moment.

Q. It seems like -- sorry, this random question, but I don't think we've asked you about Vasilije Micic before, and it seems like every off-season he's like weighing the NBA and things that. Do you have any update on how things stand with him?

SAM PRESTI: We have his rights. We traded for his rights during the Horford trade with Philadelphia. We wanted the rights to him because we think he's a really good player. He's really taken off since the time in which we acquired his rights.

All I can tell you is I thought we were pretty close at one time. Then, you know, he is a contract, and he's committed over there. But I wouldn't rule anything out. I wouldn't rule anything out. It's probably a year-to-year thing.

Q. Can you tell us what you envision the offense looking like with this team? You draft a lot of guys who are good with the ball in their hands, but at some point how scaleable are some of those players? How do you envision like the offense ultimately playing out



a few years from now?

SAM PRESTI: A couple things on that. One would be going back to invention versus discovery. Like the real answer to your question is I don't know.

I think, if I gave you an answer, that would be really limiting, self-limiting, because the team is so young that the players are going to evolve and improve and get better, and if we say, well, this is what it has to be, then you're trying to fit people into a box, so to speak, when in reality our job is to try to create an infrastructure, a framework for them to play at their best.

The trick is -- and I think I understand the genesis of your question. It's like there's a lot of guys that need the ball to be at their best. There's two things at the root of that question to answer that question. One, you're making the assumption that every single one of them is going to be successful. It's like, geez, how is everyone going to play? That's the assumption that, all of a sudden, everyone is great. Everyone is reaching this. We don't know that.

So what we're doing is probably prioritizing the fact that we don't know how it's going to look. So having people that can do multiple things makes it easier to adapt and not be limited by the infrastructure because of the guys that can do more things.

I think what you're seeing, I guess if anything, is like every team -- I don't think anything we're doing is like unconventional. What would be unconventional would be to have one point guard that walks up the court and has the ball the whole game. That would be unconventional. Conventional would be having a lot of playmakers, guys that -- maybe our difference is we have big guys, we have taller guys. But everybody's looking for the same things for the most part.

Unconventional would be like Shai has to have the ball all the time, or Josh has to have the ball. I don't know anyone that's playing like that anymore.

Ours is probably -- our opportunity for unconvention -- because I do think that's important. I don't think you can be really, really good by being conventional throughout everything you do. I think our size, our age, I think the organic nature for which the team is learning and growing together -- as Mark says, learn through experiences -- the way we're communicating directly with the guys about what our expectations are and what our goals are and how we professionally want them to improve, that to me is where our unconventional. What's convention is having a lot of playmakers, and that's what everybody is looking for.

So if we run into a situation where we have too many good players and playmakers, I will solve that somehow. The other thing is when you talk about that, or we talk about that -- not you, but when we talk about that, all of us, the only way that becomes a problem is you have people that are not willing to sacrifice for the team. It only becomes a deterrent if you can't utilize everybody. It's just like, well, everybody needs the ball. It's like it's basketball. That's how it's supposed to be played. Everybody should be touching the ball. That's the way that you generate efficient offense.

If you have people that are like, well, I can only play this way, that's really self-limiting, especially with a young team because the team's going to change. Tre Mann is a different player than he was last year. We're going to have to account for that. That's not just schematically, but the rest of the team is going to have to account for that.

Now, it's easy to say we should just focus on one guy, but then we'd be saying that guy doesn't have enough help, and then we bring in people that can do other things, and we'd say how are they going to coexist?

You see what I'm saying? It's like we're arguing both sides of the menu there. So we'll see, but hopefully we have that problem.

Q. A question about team building and roster construction. Have you seen teams become increasingly liberal with how they're trading first round picks? Like in the past it seems like a thing big market teams do, but this summer we've seen Cleveland and Minnesota makes those types of deals. You talked in your exit interview about knowing when to press the button basically. Like how do you know when that time comes, and just what have you thought about what's happened around the league with some of those other small market teams?

SAM PRESTI: Well, two different questions. I think what's become apparent is draft choices have become a commodity or a currency that they probably should always have been recognized for, just because of what they represent, in terms of like a team building structure.

But I think it all comes down to also the cycle of the team and what the goals are of the team as well. So it's been well documented, like Minnesota has, I don't think, won a playoff series in 30-plus years. They got some great new owners. Tim's going to do an awesome job. They're going to be -- I'm excited to watch them play.

But also you can't discount, like I said, every one of these teams is on their own path, and it's not just like -- I just

think everyone's goals are attached to their strategy, and you can't -- it's a horizontal timeline. You can't just cut it off and say, well, the Thunder are two years removed from the playoffs. Well, okay, but we had -- what did I say before? 75 percent of the time since we've been here we've been in the playoffs or something. You can't discount the fact that that's kind of you're working off of that.

The best example I give -- just a horrible answer, so I'm going to try to save this. I always say that the NBA is poker and not chess because chess, everybody starts from the same spot, gets the same pieces, and you get to play, right? Poker is the NBA, which is everyone gets a hand, and you play that hand the best that you can. That hand is constantly -- I mean, Minnesota, Cleveland, they're playing hands that are different than Golden State, Phoenix, so I think that is also going to guide their decision-making.

And I just don't think -- it doesn't have anything to do with us, you know what I mean? I don't see it relative in any way because our hand is different. The hands are similar because the small market nature of it, but I don't see anything different because, like I said we climbed a unique mountain the first go because we didn't have a team. We're only 15 years in. And now we're facing another one in a totally different time era. Game is different. Industry is different.

If you were asking me this question in 2009 or '10 and someone had traded all those draft picks, that would have been very unconventional. That's becoming more conventional. That's the league. That's what I'm saying, the industry has changed so much during that period of time, and that's not that long ago. That's how I would look at it.

Q. Sam, your other two lottery picks, the guys that are healthy coming out of Santa Clara, Jalen and Ousmane. I'm not going to figure out --

SAM PRESTI: That's okay. We know who you're talking about.

Q. But those two guys. I know a lot of people think Jalen is going to play a lot and contribute a lot, Ousmane maybe not as much, probably G League. How do you balance using them, having time in the G League, or is it too early to say?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's early. The answer is I don't know. One, a lot of that's Mark sitting down and figuring out like how do we maximize and optimize the development for everybody and the team development? Ousmane, obviously we have a lot longer leash on based on his age and who he is.

Also, we sit up here, and I didn't know Sabonis was going to start. So you have to let it kind of play out. Everybody has a different developmental track and needs to be stimulated different ways. I think Poku is a really good example in general because, when he arrived, he was one of the youngest players in the league. The second year he was still one of the youngest players in the league. He was coming from a place in Europe where he wasn't like in a basketball infrastructure, you know what I mean? He wasn't coming through the -- where he was playing, 2nd division Greece, he was behind a little bit, more so than other players that were coming from Europe. So that's his starting point.

His trajectory, he's had two positive years from where he started from. Now, he's had a lot of volatility in those years. But if you look at it from the balance from where he started -- and he had no summer league the first year. The first year at the end of the season, when he came back from the bubble, definite positive. Last year, same thing. By the end of the season, positive.

I think he's going to have the same positive trajectory partly because this is a guy -- and, again, he's a great underdog in a lot of ways. He was the youngest. He has obviously like physically he was behind a little bit. He's had every opportunity to kind of fold and he hadn't done that. He's better. I think he's had a good summer.

Now, the minutes will be harder to come by because the team has improved, but I think you have to have an understanding that development is a process and not an event. It's not something that you can judge day to day. That's why I think, if you looked at certain points of Poku's season last year, you would have been like, geez, this is rough. And then there would be other nights where he'd be -- by the end of the year, he's really improved.

You just have to wait and let it play out. I'm not asking anyone else to do that. I'm not saying to try to take the fun out of it, but objective, rational, thoughtful, historical, that generally helps drain the emotion out of just judging every single thing on the merits. I just think that it's hard to do that. With development. With development.

Q. I know you're not going to watch the clock, you're not going to say like this is the year whenever we'll do X, Y, Z, but what does it look like when you start to turn picks into players that you'll move in to help the team? What does it look like when you start to do that? You can't roster -- you have so many picks, you can't roster everybody. But what does it look like when you start to turn those picks into like players to come help the team? Does that make sense?

SAM PRESTI: When you say look like, what do you mean?

Q. I'm trying to -- I'm trying to just ask.

SAM PRESTI: Just say what you want to say.

Q. What does the success look like, I guess? So is it like making the playoffs? Is it like winning a round? In your mind.

SAM PRESTI: Is there something that triggers that?

Q. Yes.

SAM PRESTI: I really think the team declares itself. Going back to -- I don't want to say it's an example, but I've used it before.

We had Jeff Green starting at four with the core of the team that would be -- accomplish a lot of the records that I mentioned earlier. We were like a 50-win level team, not a net six team, but like pretty good. But we kept playing Memphis and Denver and L.A. and the Clippers, and they had really big front lines.

This is another example of like if we want to judge the past based on the idealized norms of the present, we would say that the Zach and Gasol teams were misguided, and Gasol and Bynum were misguided, and Blake Griffin and Andre Jordan were bad teams and what were they thinking, and the Thunder was stupid because they had -- that was just a different era of basketball. You know, Kirilenko should have taken more threes.

But we couldn't compete with those teams, but we had to go through that to figure that out, and I think like the team will show that through its competition -- because I heard this phrase a long time ago and it always stuck with me. Friction polishes. Friction polishes. When you run up against difficulty, it gives you ideas as to like how to solve for those problems.

We haven't run up against that yet because I don't think the team itself has really declared who we're going to be ultimately, and I think that we are definitely on the path to that, but I don't think we can say and predict the needs of the team because we haven't -- we're not a fully formed team.

That's why I was saying, if you want to get some answers to that, the priorities have to be in the right areas first. Like we can't see the season -- we have to see the season as a marathon of improvement. Older, more experienced teams

do that. That helps them understand their needs.

We have to prioritize -- personal goals are great and important, but we can't let that get in the way of performing at a level that helps us really identify our needs. I'm not really worried about that with the team, but these are just the ills.

When Vegas does the lines, the over-under at the beginning of the year, the young teams are generally not picked to win a lot of games. It's not because they're not talented. It's because young teams generally have a hard time prioritizing those things to win a lot. Do you see what I'm saying? It's not just inexperience and age. It's also, well, what are the other things that young teams have blind spots on? The team with the least blind spots gives themselves the best chance to win.

And teams that have been together for a while have less blind spots. They communicate better internally. They address things directly with each other. They don't talk to people outside the organization to take direction for how to perform inside the team because no one else is inside the team. It's not intentional, but you're going to get very individual, focused directives.

So I just think all those things have to coalesce, then you start performing on a consistent basis where you know what to expect. And then you go this is not good enough. This is short.

Now, there's never going to be a perfect team -- I've said that forever -- because every time you fix something, you're leaving the back door open somewhere else. Like I said, the blind spots are knowing that's the back door and that you have to, as a team, collectively account for that.

Even the Warriors or the Clippers, they're going to go through the season. There's going to be something where they're like, well, this isn't as good as they can be, and these teams are really, really good.

A lot of times the collective wisdom of the team -- that's why I like watching the national teams. Those national teams, those are some of the best teams in terms of like the way the game is played, the way they care about each other, the way they sacrifice for each other. There's just a genuine love amongst those national teams.

Those Argentinean teams, I feel so lucky to have been around some of those teams when Ginobili and Scola and Alberto and Pepe Sanchez, it's just those teams are operating at such a high level internally that they weren't the most talented. They knew they had limitations, but they collectively solved for those problems through

communication and recognizing that there was a marathon to get to the medal round. They made each other better that way.

I don't know, it's going to reveal itself, but we have to be consistent enough to demonstrate what the needs are, and then we have to have alternatives that actually make sense to add. As we've seen, there are players that get traded for draft choices. Those draft choices have become more universally valuable. We don't know what the new rules potentially could be that could change those things. I would be surprised if they became less valuable.

That's the best answer I can give you. I don't want to sit here and say, hey, look, I really know the answer to this question. That's what's top of mind for me. That's how I would think about it. Flexibility, optionality are the best things, and getting consistent performance from the team, knowing what you have, because you also don't want to go make an acquisition in an area that you might have a burgeoning solution and now -- because what you'd like to do is be able to fill the needs where you don't have that.

To your point earlier, not every player is going to work out. So you've got to let that kind of come to fruition versus try to predict where you're going to need something. The guys that don't come to fruition that may not make it or might not be as good as we had hoped or get injured or something along the line, that's what that reservoir hopefully can help add, and then you get continuity from those adds as well.

I really think the team will improve continuously as a result of the continuity and the collective mindset, and the think the coaching staff is very good, and I think that's going to help us a great deal too.

Q. Sam, in your exit interview, you -- I'm paraphrasing here, but you basically said when teams, not just your team specifically, are no longer playing games of consequence, it's responsible to shift towards development. How do you define games of consequence? Over the course of the season, we've seen you guys make that shift late in the year. Like how do you know when to do that?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, the games of consequence would be like where you're in the position to achieve, I guess you could say like games that matter competitively in terms of like postseason play or something along those lines.

Games of meaning -- every game means something because every game is an opportunity developmentally for your team. But I think it's something that -- I think people have taken that and tried to run with that, if I can say. I think people have tried to code that or maybe even take it

and misrepresent it intentionally at times.

All we're saying is generally at the end of the season in every sport, when you are not in the playoff picture -- baseball, football -- I don't know hockey well enough -- you use the opportunity to get experience for different players. Not because you have any ill intention, but you're actually trying to compete for the following year.

So I think that sometimes unintentionally people have tried to take that comment and use it in a way that I don't think was the way it was intended to be used.

If I can be more direct, I would say that we've always taken the approach that we go into every season and we wait to see how the season unfolds. When we had the Gallo team, we were the only ones to say, hey, wait, before you think that we're going to be this or that, why don't we play the games and see how the team performs? We ran that out, and we're playing for the 4th seed the night that things were shut down.

But if we had already determined what kind of year we were going to have or what we were going to do, we never would have recognized that.

Last year I gave you my answers. We had redlined a lot of the guys. We had some -- now, you're asking me about Shai's -- is Shai injury prone? How quickly can we get him back? Last year we were saying -- people were wondering if he was really hurt. It's like we can't win. Honestly speaking, of all the injuries we've had, that ankle sprain in Boston, I had a great view of that. That was a wicked sprain. I turned away when I saw that one.

People across the league focus on developing young players as a means to build their team. Portland, Indiana -- I think Jordan Poole from Golden State is a result of that, the year that Steph was out with the finger, and that's just how teams are built and constructed.

That's been going on in the NBA for years, and other sports as well. I'm sure the Royals have a bunch of younger players playing right now because that's how you get experience, that's how you get good.

Q. It's year 15 in Oklahoma City, but it's year 16 overall for you as the GM. Have you ever thought about your growth from then till now?

SAM PRESTI: I do. I do. I think about it a lot because I ask everybody in the organization to reflect and to push themselves to be better. Obviously that has to start with me at the very first because I can't expect other people to take that type of approach to their own development if I



don't model that.

I have a lot of thoughts on that. I'm happy to answer them, but I don't know where to go with that unless you're more specific.

Q. I guess in what ways do you feel like you've grown from then until now?

SAM PRESTI: It's a lot, man. I mean, it's a lot. You have to remember everything I say is coming from my heart. So what I say about progress is what I really believe in life. I'm not doing this -- this is not performance art. This isn't Twitter. This is what I really think.

It's all about where you start from. I started when I was 29. So I was 29 years old, and I was scared out of my mind about the challenge I was taking on because I didn't -- I don't know. I don't know how you guys were when you were 29, but I was being entrusted to do something that I didn't really know or think when I was younger would be possible. So I also wasn't as emotionally mature and have the life experience that I have now. So that's a big part of it. I think I've grown a lot as a person.

I also think that experiences and exposure to experiences are really what make us who we are. So like there's a difference between stepping out of your comfort zone, because you hear that all the time, and expanding your comfort zone. Stepping out is temporary. Expanding is really intentionally putting yourself in conscious discomfort. That's something I've always tried to do.

Like I said, I've always felt like fear of convenience, fear of comfort -- one of my favorite books is *The Strenuous Life* by Theodore Roosevelt. The theory is you have to put yourself in difficult positions to learn the most about yourself and build or callous up a little bit. I'm definitely more durable today than I was then.

I mean, I also have family, and that's changed my whole life completely. I have kids. I have three unbelievable kids. I met my wife here. We got married here. We met in San Antonio, excuse me. I had my kids here. I mean, life is totally different. It's 16 years, man. If I was the same person, I'd be really disappointed.

That's why I like what I do because it changes around you a little bit, you know what I'm saying? Like things have really changed. That first mountain was incredible, but you couldn't make that -- we made it last for 11-something years. And now we're working in a totally different environment. We can't do the things we did then because a lot of people are using the strategies we used to get to the first mountain to climb their mountain.

And some teams never get to climb the mountain because they never get good enough, you know. Other teams, to get to their second mountain, they kind of like wander along in the wilderness until they bump into it. We're trying to not do the wandering part. Like we're trying to -- the valley between the two, we're trying to shorten that.

We could go on an expedition and wait until we bump into it and then climb it, but we're being extremely intentional about how we're trying to do that. That's conscious discomfort. I think that's going to make our organization stronger, more durable. It's going to build more pride in place, and it makes the journey more purposeful.

A lot of people don't want to hear that, but I think it's part of self improvement, and I want those types of challenges. Just like Oklahoma City, a lot of people didn't think we were going to be successful here, but there's a lot of people in this building that said we're going to make it that way.

So I think I've changed a lot. I hope for the better. Most of it learning through experiences and being honest about my strengths and my limitations. I've got a lot of limitations.

Q. I could be wrong, but I think your first draft was drafting K.D. at 2. 15 years later you draft Chet at 2. Did you feel any more pressure or less pressure then than you do now -- did now, when you drafted Chet?

SAM PRESTI: No, I don't really look at it that way. I think when you're younger, at least for me, you have the confidence of ignorance. Extremely idealistic, but you don't know a lot of things. I think, as you get older, you actually realize for real that you don't know. I think the longer you go, the more you realize there's very little you actually know.

Being comfortable with that uncertainty -- like I said before, it's a lot more -- it's more persuasive to provide you the illusion of control than the reality of uncertainty. That's why I've said to a lot of questions today, I don't know the answer to that, and I think that's a healthier way to approach it than to try to pretend like I can predict how many games Chet Holmgren is worth or how many games we're going to win. There's no way to know that.

You have to go through the experiences. You have to be adaptable. You have to take the hits as they come, and you have to enjoy the wins as they -- you know, figuratively and literally, as they come too. So I don't look at it as pressure.

One thing I really don't like is comparisons because I don't

think it really gets you anywhere. I think comparisons generally lead to disappointment, and they're never equal. So like comparing this person's article with that person's article, like how is that helping the articles? You know what I mean? I don't think that really helps. I think it's you're writing yours the best that it can be, you're learning the most that you can, and that's all.

I think that's what we're trying to do. I'm not comparing one to the other. Time is different. The industry is different. The people are different. That why I was saying, it's not Kraftwerk. It's not Kraftwerk. I love Kraftwerk, but that's a certain style.

Then the opposite of that would be something like J Dilla, who is lagging behind, intentionally lagging behind. When people heard that initially, people were like is something wrong? First time I heard that was on A Tribe Called Quest record, I was like what's wrong with this? It wasn't until years later that I realized there is like a genius basically doing it. I'm sure he had people telling him he was crazy when he did it, et cetera, et cetera. I'm not sure how I got on that.

Q. This is the most amusing press conference you've ever had.

SAM PRESTI: I didn't go into it intentionally. It must have been the concert the other night.

Q. By the way, your son has got to think that every rock star talks to his dad directly.

SAM PRESTI: If you caught it, he did say my son's name at the end too because he met him before.

Q. He'll have high standards.

SAM PRESTI: Yes, and it's probably not healthy. We have to get a little more minimal on those experiences, I've come to --

Q. Sit in the back row next time?

SAM PRESTI: We were in the back row, I will say that. We were in the back row. Yes, he said Nick at the end, and I'm claiming that was not Collison, to Collison at least.

No, they were very gracious. They're great, and they're really good people.

Q. How difficult is this particular roster crunch? You have an investment in a lot of these guys, and you're going to have to let go of guys that have been drafted or traded for. How difficult is this particular camp for

you and your team?

SAM PRESTI: That's a wonderful question. I wouldn't say it's more difficult. You're hitting on something that's a reality, such as relationships.

Especially with guys that you've seen -- and, again, we don't know what's going to happen, but the majority of the team is pretty young. So guys that have really come a long way, I really feel good about the development of just about every guy on the team so far, and I think they're going to go on to be successful in other places. We're not going to be able to keep everybody.

Here's the big thing. You want to make sure that you feel like they're prepared to be successful in the rough and tumble NBA when they're not here, like good habits, professionalism, understanding the bigger picture of their career, and a lot of things I talked about, how to prepare mentally, physically, emotionally. Those things are like really important.

I'll give you a great example. D.J. White. So drafted D.J. We were in Seattle. We drafted Russell, Serge, D.J., and maybe DeVon Hardin in that draft, I think. And D.J. made the move here with us. He was here.

Didn't get a ton of opportunity, had some injury setbacks. But we poured a lot into him. He was like a really mature first, second year player just because of his background, his parents. He was just a stud as a guy. We traded him to Charlotte, actually for Nazr. Now it's funny because they both work here, so ironic.

But when we traded him, someone from Charlotte called me -- I can't remember who it was. I don't think it was Rich. It may have been Rich. And was like D.J. White is showing up. First he's beating everyone to the gym, and like that was a sign of, all right, good. He's prepared. I didn't play a lot here, but his habits were really solid. They called to kind of say this guy's very young but kind of understands how to operate, and we always wanted to instill that in the players that we have here.

Jeremiah Lamb is another example of that. He's turned himself into a really good NBA player. Didn't get a ton of opportunity here, but we had to work on a lot of the daily habits just to get consistent performance because all those guys are great guys, but as I said, the team with the least blind spots generally gives itself the best chance. The players that know how to limit distractions -- that doesn't mean box yourself in a room and do nothing. It just means knowing when and where those distractions have a place, and then in your professional career, where they become detrimental to progress.

And that's really -- I think it's gotten harder and harder for young players today. Much has been made about the age limit and all that stuff has been discussed. I hope I'm not going to get fined for even saying that. But the level of distraction for all of us in our day-to-day lives is so immense, that it's hard to imagine that we can really focus on much.

Try to be maybe 19, 20 years old, and try to create habits and a career for yourself knowing that you only have 10 to 12 years to play and you're addicted to your phone because your phone is scientifically designed to manipulate your psyche. Like it literally is designed scientifically to manipulate your mind so that you use it more, right? I'm addicted to it. I'm addicted to my phone.

And now you've got a young person who's out there having to play, perform. It's hard. The more you can compartmentalize those things and see those things for what they are. That's why the older teams do a good job with that. That's why I say the Vegas line, they're factoring that stuff in. That's the headwind to young teams.

I don't see anything wrong with talking about that. I don't think we have these issues. This is not like saying, oh, we have this. I'm just forecasting it because I've seen young teams across the NBA. We've had young teams here. The older teams do a good job with these things, like I mentioned earlier, and we can learn by experience, or he can intentionally try to prioritize some of those things.

I think it will help us long term if we don't have to like take the path that everyone generally takes, oh, bumped my head. Shouldn't do that. Shouldn't go -- we have a game tonight. I shouldn't spend a whole afternoon doing this because I won't be ready to play tonight. Things you've got to learn. I'm more tired right now. Yeah, because you weren't off your feet. That's not prioritizing winning.

So I think it comes in more ways -- like your point, trading a bunch of draft picks so you can get a player that can help you win. Is the group that we have committed to doing those things so that that player can actually be helpful, or are we still going to be struggling with common things young teams struggle with?

I'm pretty confident our team can do it because I know the guys. I think they're going to take it on and understand this is our opportunity to sharpen the blade, especially in the West.

Q. Sam, if you can tell us, without getting fined, are you in favor of reducing the draft age?

SAM PRESTI: I don't want to talk about that. I don't know where the line is. I've said to you guys before we need to see that stuff before. To answer your question, the first thing I should have said is what are the rules? What are the rules?

Imagine going and doing something really significant and finding out the rules have completely changed on you. That would be three times the charm, but I'd like to try to avoid that if we can.

Q. Sam, when Mayor Holt mentioned the possibility of a new arena and there's some pushback by certain members of the OKC community for concerns that it being literally publicly funded. What would your message be to those with those concerns?

SAM PRESTI: That's not one I was ready for. I think everybody has a right to an opinion. That's what makes the country and community we have great. I think those concerns should be heard, and I think the people that feel otherwise should be heard as well. Hopefully through that process, there can be an honest exchange of ideas without there being a polarized point of view of right and wrong or your tribe and my tribe or everything's wrong in the world.

Like the only way to get to that is thoughtful discourse, respectful discourse, but I definitely think that your points are all taken and people should be heard. I think vice versa, to be heard, you also have to be willing to let other people be heard as well. Hopefully we can come to a place where everybody feels like they've been heard.

Guys, thank you so much for taking the time. This will be our 15th year. It's not lost on us that a big part of the success of the team is also through the relationship we've had with the media. There's been a lot of different people that have sat in these chairs over the course of time. And everybody's treated us, I feel, fairly and constructively.

You're a huge factor in the type of message that our fans and all of our people get. We don't really have control over that. You guys do. Any time I sit up here, I'm going to try to answer what you got. I also appreciate you giving me the liberty to speak to our fans and sponsors, and that's what makes it different here. I feel I owe that to them a bit, and you guys have always been unbelievable with that.

I know these are long, but I'm very respectful that you allow me to use the time because I want to speak to those people as well. Thank you.

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