

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Thursday, April 20, 2023

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Sam Presti

Press Conference



SAM PRESTI: Just before we get started, a couple things, people that I want to thank, and then we'll go over just some season review, next season, some future stuff, and then get to questions, whatever you guys want to talk about. Obviously we'll cover whatever you want to talk about.

This is the close of our 15th season in Oklahoma City. (Audio interruption) We wouldn't be in the position that we are in without the contributions of all those different people.

As I said before, we've packed a lot into 15 years and we're looking forward to the next 15, but that is a result of all the different people that have touched the Thunder in some way, shape, or form.

Obviously our players are the most important people in the organization and also in the history of the organization.

I also want to thank the fans that were at the airport the last couple times. We know there's a lot of people that probably would like to be there, because we have fans all over the world and we have fans all over the state, but the effort and the commitment and the fandom that it takes to do something like that is not lost on anybody, and we'll never, ever take that for granted.

I really feel like those people are just representative of kind of the die-hards that exist. I think it makes a big impression on the players because a lot of these guys have grown up watching the Thunder because, like I said earlier, 15 years, there's no way to cut it, it's been a little while.

I feel like that was probably this iteration's first exposure to what it's like to be a Thunder player and what that entails.

I also want to thank everybody, fan-wise, that stood and clapped for those Thunder legacy guys. As I said, the most important people in the history of the Thunder are our players, and so just the recognition that all of these guys have passed through the doors is super valuable.

I feel like those are the true blue people that really -- they love the Thunder and all of its warts. It doesn't matter; if you wore the jersey, we're with you.

I think in a small city like this, that really makes a difference. So I want to point that out.

Then to the fans that stood this season as a result of maybe a Kenrich Williams deflection or a J-Will charge or a Lu Dort dive on the floor or an Isaiah Joe three that sent the other team to a time-out and they felt compelled to stand and clap, we're super grateful for that.

We want to have and build a home-court advantage that is going to help us win a lot of games, and those people that are doing those things on the smallest levels really add up and help make the experience for our players unique. We want to just share that we acknowledge those people.

I also want to thank the media, everybody that's in the room, everybody that covers the team. You guys are an important part to telling the story of the team and serve a great purpose for the organization, even if we don't always agree with everything that you say or do, but it's a critical function to what goes on with us as a part of the community.

So just jumping into this season in review, last fall, I guess September, the last time we were here, I talked a little bit about the bandwidth that I thought the team could potentially capture. I talked about the fact that there's probably a high end and then there's an equally low end as a result of the fact that the team is young, and the team has or had relative inexperience, still has relative inexperience.

I laid out the fact that there's certain things that tend to work against young teams in the NBA. I see some head nodding, so you must have been awake for that part.

But things that get in the way of young teams are pretty consistent and they're not always talent based, but I thought our guys did an excellent job with some of these things.

The first thing was a lot of times the headwind is personal ambition, statistics, awards, things of that nature. Another thing would be just a hard time internally communicating



person to person. That's kind of hard when you're 19, 20, 21, 22 years old. There are people that are 50 years old that have a hard time communicating, so it's hard for young people in this type of environment to do that. I thought our guys did a good job with that.

There's so many outside voices in the NBA. I call them the silent forces of the NBA, that may have the best interest of the players in mind but maybe not the best interest of the team. So the ability to manage those relationships and see those things for what they were and not allow that to affect what we're trying to get done as a collection of people, I thought our guys did a good job with that.

Understanding that the season is full of lulls and fits and starts, and seeing the season as a process and not necessarily evaluating every game or every week because that's just the sign of -- they're reeking of inexperience. I think the guys understood that.

You've got to evaluate it kind of month to month to really understand where you're at. They did a great job with that.

I mentioned physicality a few times last time, as well. I thought we made strides in that area. I'll talk about this a little bit later, as well. We have more to do there, but I think we made strides in that area, as well.

I thought the guys did a good job with priorities, and I think that's in addition to just like internal development and player development, part of the reason why we were able to achieve what we were able to achieve this year in terms of progress.

I also talked at the beginning of the preseason about the fact that our rate of learning would have to outpace our aging and experience. That's another thing. I don't see as many nods here, so obviously at that point I lost you.

The point there is when you have a young team, part of the way you make up for some of the gaps that you're going to have is how quickly do you adapt, how quickly do you learn. That's a really important part of development, team development as well as personal development.

I thought our guys learned along the way and could apply that stuff pretty quickly. I was really impressed with that. Those are pretty good rates.

Now, all these things I just mentioned, they're going to be on the docket for us to continue to manage and corral for quite a long time, until they become habitual, but this was a good starting point for us, and I thought the guys continued to learn.

Part of it's because of the situations that they were put in. I also think that Mark did a great job of not blasting through adversities but took time to explain and unpack why they may be happening and how they can be utilized down the road for improvement.

Again, part of seeing the season in segments and not just in these bite-sized hot moments, I think that was really important.

I talk all the time with the staff, and have for years, about this theory of in order to -- it's kind of like natural selection for the NBA. But in order to make it, first you have to have instincts as a player and as a team. That kind of keeps you surviving.

If you have reasonable instincts, that affords you experiences. If you are a good learner, you can accumulate the experiences, good and bad, learn from them, and then eventually over time you can funnel those into wisdom. If you collect enough of that wisdom, eventually that leads to poise during uncertainty.

We're seriously still in the experience-gathering phase, but I do think we're learning from those effectively, and hopefully down the line in the future we'll be able to look back and say we have some wisdom as a result of this.

We've seen this situation before. We've been in this dynamic before. There's no way for us to speed that up. There's no way for us to slow that down. That's going to present itself as it should, however it may be.

More on this season. I thought the play style continued to grow and evolve. I do think that a lot of the progress that we saw this season in that respect is all linked back to what we were able to get accomplished in the 2020-'21 season, and I do think it's important to point out that that season, the '20-'21 season, we got so much accomplished in that year.

I think probably for people that don't do this for a living, they may not understand or see that, but many of the things that people were praising this year had nothing to do with this year. They were things that were being discussed, molded, sculpted, pressed in that period of time that allowed us to execute or implement some things now.

I don't think that should be forgotten. There will be things that hopefully we accomplish this year that may be invisible now that could show up at a later date. That's why we talk about this being in sequence, things compounding and taking a long lens on the development of the team and the players.

Our shooting took a big jump. We were last in the league in three-point shooting last year. I think we're middle of the pack now. I don't know the decimal points and how close we are to maybe either side of that, but we're somewhere in the middle.

Our bench shooting obviously took a big jump as a result of Isaiah, and that's great, but I think the real question is why is that the case. A big part of that is the shots they're getting and the way they're generated, and then when we're playing really well, it allows us to make more shots.

So you can look at a shot chart and they can be coming from the right places, but that's kind of a very shallow way to look at that because it's how are they being delivered, what's the timing of that, what's happened in the possession before that. It's not just launching them from there they are, it's leading up time.

I thought our lead-up and the shots we were generating were much improved in terms of the rhythm in which we were playing, and that helped.

Physically, we talked about this, a lot of people think about physicality, and they think about one side of the ball, they think about defense. Offensively I think there's room for us to get more physical. You can see that at the free-throw line. We were last in the league of getting into the bonus before our opponent. That's not a place you want to be.

We spent about a minute per game where the other team was in the bonus and we were not -- excuse me, four minutes per game, a minute per period. So four minutes a game where we get fouled, we don't shoot, they get fouled, shot.

I think everybody knows we play downhill. I said this to someone the other day, we're downhill, like a Warren Miller movie, for those of you old enough to know what that is. We've got to get something for that, and a big part of that is physicality with the ball.

I think Josh specifically, because he's as big as he is, sometimes he's got to figure out a way to turn those fouls into calls, and we've got to do a better job with that.

Then defensively we have to -- we're always going to need more nasty. There's no question about that. So we have to be able to dial that up when needed, but also playing controlled. But physicality and then nasty, we have to have that if we're going to play in big games and succeed.

Our NET rating went from -- I think it improved nine points or something like that. Probably won't see that again. And a big part of that is because of where it was, quite frankly,

but it was a significant jump.

Again, I'm less concerned with what happens. I'm very, very concerned with how it happens.

The jump on that is pretty simple. We were able to get those numbers going in the right direction because of internal growth and development of our players, and the fact that we had some guys that had been steadily improving over years and then a few guys that steadily improved over games is what gave us the jump that we got.

If you really think about the teams that we've had here, the through line for a lot of the jumps in NET rating or even the sustaining of rating has been through the internal development that we've had player development wise over the last 15 years, and this kind of played out similarly.

I do think with respect to that, again, going back to the rate of learning, the guys were not put in comfortable positions over the last few years and there was a lot of concern about that, and I mentioned in these conferences that we can't bubble wrap everybody. Like they're going to have to face steep circumstances. They're going to have to compete and they're going to have to learn that you get your ass kicked sometimes. If you do, how do you respond to that.

I thought we had some good response. I thought that, again, we didn't make it easy on the guys. Whether it was we traded for Kemba Walker; we did not bring Kemba Walker in. Even though I think it would -- yes, he could have helped us in some ways, but we needed that experience for the guys that we were moving forward with and the fruits of those situations and circumstances that they were placed in. I think we saw that this year, specifically with Shai, but also with other players, as well.

When you're put in those adverse situations you compensate and you learn and you figure out how to do it as a team. So I think that was really important for us.

Turning to next season, this will be our third draft in this kind of sequence that we're in as a team. So we're excited about that.

At the same time, you've heard me say this for 15 years, every season you go back to square one. I think you probably heard that from the guys, too. You go back to square one, whether we won 60 games, Western Conference Finals, or we won 20 games, we have to start over.

That's what teams are, and that's how you build these

types of endurable habits that we want to have. You don't carry that with you.

It's going to get harder for us. There's no question about it. The only way to solve that problem is to go back to square one and start figuring out how to be the best team we can by the end of 82 games and flush whatever happened previous.

I think the guys, again, on the learning component, I think they learned how long the season is, not just physically, mentally, and emotionally, no question about that. Again, conscious discomfort. You have to go through these things. You have to experience them. You can't just tell them about that. They have to go through that, and they have to build the endurance to deal with it.

I think they also learned that the sky falls on every NBA team at least two times a year. Over 82 games, you will not play well for 82 games. You may play horrible for weeks, maybe a month. You don't want to have several months, but every team, the teams that are still playing right now, the sky fell on them this season and everybody freaked out, and the teams that have sophisticated -- a sophisticated competitiveness to them understand that while you're going through that, that's the solution.

The regression is, okay, you have to keep pounding through this and working through it, and I think if you have the right principles, the right mentality, and the right temperament, you can work through that and become a better player and a better team as a result of that.

I think our guys figured that out.

So there's going to be lulls. Can you play through the lulls? Can you block out the noise? Can you not become part of the audience? Can you still maintain the perspective of the competitor and not the observer, because that's your only solution, is to work through it.

I think we did that several times this year, quite frankly. I was very impressed with that, both the players and the coaches.

One specific example was actually early in the year. We were in -- we had a trip. We went to Milwaukee and Detroit. We had started the season almost, I think, the play style was very idealistic. We were in a good spot there. Irrespective of the outcomes, you could tell that we were progressing.

We got off track on that trip for whatever reason, and we were able to snap back quickly after that. I think we had maybe one off day or practice or something -- I don't even

know if we had a practice, but we played the next game was against Milwaukee, went double overtime with them and ended up losing the game.

But we were back to the brand of basketball. Even if it wasn't being executed perfectly, the intentions were back to where we need them to be, and we did that really quick.

For a young team, in my experience, that can take weeks. It took a couple days. I think that was very promising because it shows, A, the guys intellectually are getting that, and then there's an intention and want-to to do it the right way, but it's hard because in order to do that you have to override all these other ways you've been thinking or doing things for a long time.

It's not just make a choice, it's you have to make that choice and override the other habit you might have had previously. I thought it was really impressive.

Play style-wise, like I said before, we figured it out through the season. We're going to have to do that every season because the team is going to change as a result of the players improving and getting better. We're in I always say observation mode, but we have to continue to observe and see how the team is continually kind of improving and changing.

We're at our best when everyone knows -- when whoever is on the floor knows their function, isn't trying to redefine their function and isn't trying to expand their function. When that's happening, we have a chance to play at a really, really high level. That's hard to do.

I thought our guys did a really good job with that. Because the goal isn't to have great individual performances; the goal is to have everybody playing well together in one totality.

If we can do that -- that's hard to do, but to me, we figured out ways through the year to do that.

I'll give you one example. When J-Dub started to emerge and improve at a pretty significant rate, the team had to absorb his improvement in a way that didn't compress or stifle other people. So how do you play well together, not just can you get great individual performances? That's where I'd like the team to ultimately get to, and to be able to correct those things and figure those things out in time, and I think we're on our way to doing that.

I also thought that we didn't let -- beginning of the season obviously Chet had an injury. There was impending doom on the team and it was the end of the world. We never really responded to that as a team. I think the guys did a

good job not allowing themselves to be channelled or changed by arbitrary expectations. I thought the coaches did a good job of that.

Probably the most important aspect of that in my opinion is that we maintain like a beginner's mindset. We were open -- usually when you have something like that, these extra changes that are arbitrary and kind of thrown out there for no real purpose other than someone has got to say something, you can allow that to affect your work, your craft, and I thought we did a good job of shutting that out and taking a beginner's mindset of, okay, without judgment, what can we do and what should we try here, because we need to learn as much as we can.

When you're thinking about trying to meet arbitrary expectations, you will shortcut things. You will make poor decisions and you won't be as instinctive. Because they talk about beginner's mindset or childlike mindset, you're just doing things and trying things and figuring them out and learning, and when you have a young team, it's like a young person, you can learn real fast.

My kids, I can't believe how quickly they learn, because there's nothing else interrupting them. They're not thinking about, is anyone going to think I look foolish doing this? What if the food is all over my face? They just eat the food. They figure out what they like, what works, what doesn't work. I think that's important in sports; I think that's important in life.

I thought the team did a good job of maintaining an open mind to the different things that we needed to do.

I'll give you one example. If you look at the box score from the first Minnesota game where we started the game, started the season, and the last one, there's a lot of differences. In the first one, Isaiah Joe played 11 seconds. J-Will did not play; Jalen Williams played very briefly, but part of that was because he got injured, but also he wasn't playing 30 minutes or something like that. He probably would have played 15 minutes. Jalen Williams didn't start.

The team from that point to the end of the season was a completely different team. If we were trying to race against arbitrary timing or arbitrary expectations that are set for us, we wouldn't have gotten to those things.

So a lot of credit to the coaches and the players for seeing the season as a real marathon and maintaining a real open perspective.

The development of the team happens in that environment, and we have to continue, I have to continue, to try and create that environment. One of the things I say to the

coaches and I've said since I've done this job, is do not fear the outcomes. The outcomes will come downstream from the decisions that we make.

Let's make quality decisions, let's ask the right questions, let's define the problems, and then move from there. The outcomes are only going to teach us those things. Unfortunately as human beings we react to them, and we have to be good about not doing that over the course of time.

Looking forward, I said this in the fall, as well, what we're looking for is tint performance over a long period of time as a result of continuous improvement and progress. Some years are going to be better than others. I think I used craftwork as the example, craftwork being like the thing that's just mechanical and just runs on its own time.

I used some other drummers I think probably, because I use analogies and music is a big part of my life, but sometimes you're going to be ahead of the beat and sometimes you're going to be behind the beat, and the key being that at the end, you just want to be better than you were.

There's going to be a point in time where we're behind the beat. This year we were Stewart Copeland. We were definitely ahead of it. There were some really positive things that were happening. But there's going to be a year where we may not be ahead. We might be behind it a little bit. That's okay, too.

Like I said, resistance, regression, struggle, that's kind of how we've gotten to this point anyway, even in the season, but also individually, the players. We need resistance and friction as human beings to be at our best. If not, unless you're super human, your standards will wilt a little bit.

We're going to welcome that and figure out how do we define the problems that are creating that, and then we'll get a path to solve them.

I think we're really well positioned to deal with whatever comes at us, and I also think this particular group of guys has a chance to win a lot of games together. I think that -- they took their first step in that by making those decisions on the priorities I talked about at the beginning. They can win a lot of games together if they choose to do that.

Now, everyone has got to do their job, myself included, the coaches, but I really like the way the conversations are within the building and what they're about, and the openness in which we can discuss the things that could potentially get in the way of being the type of team we want to be.

I give them a ton of credit for their maturity, their intellectual maturity, and I think it shows through in the way they play, too. But I think their intentions are in the right spot. I think they're driven. I think they know that we have a ton of work in front of us, and they're not shying away from that.

Just in closing, I talked about the mountain, the second mountain. We're staring that sucker down. We're seeing it, and we're trying to figure out how we're going to find a way to the top of that. I mentioned we have a ton of work to do. No one knows that more than us. We have a ton of humility about what we're trying to do and how challenging it is.

We also have a ton of humility about how little we control a lot of this. There's a lot of randomness that goes into this industry, and I hope that's come through in my comments in the past.

A lot of the things, positive things that happened this year, they were not like, no one is pressing levers to make all that happen. There's a lot of randomness and good fortune that has to go into things, and then you have to remember that when you get some tough breaks.

I do think it's important to note that the progress that we did make, we didn't make by watching the clock. We didn't make that progress by working off somebody else's arbitrary idea as to when things should or should not be happening.

In fact, if we were doing that, I don't think we'd have a nine-point swing in NET rating. I don't think we'd be in a playoff-type environment at the end of the season. I don't think we'd be seeing the type of player development improvements that we've made.

I think quite the opposite.

So we're going to continue to let everybody else watch the clock and create the arbitrary expectations. Our focus is on setting the pace for ourselves, making the best decisions for the organization, no matter how unpopular they may be, taking the criticism for doing those things, and then following through with the mindset that we'll solve it.

We'll figure it out together because we have the right people in the building to do that. If we have calm persistence and the discipline to resist the path of least resistance, I think we will continue to make progress over the course of time.

With that, I'll let you guys fire away.

Q. Before the season you said save your predictions or your assumptions and I think we're going to make progress this year, I'm confident we are, and we are going to be a better team at the end of the year. You said that after Chet got hurt. What made you so confident that you guys were going to be better?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think a couple things. One, the age of the team, right. You have a young team. There's going to be improvement in that. As long as you can stay open and less judgmental and observe it as it's happening, you'll see some progress. You may not get the results you want right away, but you could see that was going to happen.

The other thing is that the things that were put in place in the previous two seasons, we're scaling up to be able to see some benefits of that eventually. So I was confident, maybe more in the work that was done the previous two years than I was in that particular year, because I do not -- I'm not ever going to predict what's going to happen. I've done this long enough to know that no one can do that.

I'm happy to let other people pretend that they can. I know I can't do that, so I'm never putting myself in that position.

I've had players I thought were going to be good that have turned out not to be good. I had players that I didn't think would be good that turned out to be good. We're all guessing to a degree, right. So I wasn't coming across saying -- I thought we'd be a better team. I didn't know how that would manifest itself.

Q. You mentioned the physicality and "nasty." Is that maybe the number one priority either through the draft or any other acquisition form for you guys as an organization?

SAM PRESTI: No, I wouldn't say that. I'd say that when I'm talking about that stuff, a lot of times you say "physicality," people probably on our team think immediately of Lu or J-Will.

But Isaiah Joe plays physical, so physicality is about what you're bringing to the team as a competitor and whether or not you're putting yourself -- the opponent is feeling you.

Look, we know how -- we've all seen the NBA work for years. Young teams are going to have to fight a little harder to get the things that we want to get. That's fine. That's not -- there's no victims here. There's no victim. We've got to be a little more physical, a little nastier at different situations to be the level team we want to be.

It's more about disposition, I think, than anything, and we



made great strides in that. But you're not going to get all the way where you need to go. As the games get more amplified, your physicality needs to continue to become more amplified, and that's like a statement in totality, not like one person or anything like that.

Q. In three years, Coach Daigneault goes from G-League coach to runner up for Coach of the Year. What does it mean to see him recognized in this way, and what stands out to you about how he got to this point?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I was going to go to the how. It's nice that he got recognized. I think it's more important to understand the why behind it.

Well, I'm happy for him that people are seeing -- especially his peers are seeing the things that he's doing that are effective. Again, I'd say that a lot of the benefits of the year were maybe in his first and second years there was a lot of really good things that were being implemented that I think are scaling, that can be scaled at this point. That's why we were so focused and intentional during those years, even though it seemed maybe like we weren't.

You've got to give him the credit for that because he was able to put those things in place during a period of time where we weren't getting a lot of results.

But if you think about the coaches that -- in the world, when you think of coaches, they're generally thinking in sequence like that, the ones that we mentally go to in our mind when you think about coaches.

So I think he's a good sequential thinker. Obviously he's got good relationships with the guys.

But I mentioned this right after we hired him, and I always laugh because remember it took a little while to get through that and everyone was very concerned about how long the search was taking. It was a big topic.

The thing about it is he's kind of been here. He's new to so many people, but he's -- I've known him since he was like 26 or 25 because I used to go to Florida and we'd -- I can remember calling Billy Donovan and asking permission to hire Mark.

I remember interviewing him at Vast, as a matter of fact, and having dinner with him there. I'm just happy for him. He loves what he does. I think he does a great job, and I think that he speaks the language and is totally aligned with the organization, which I think helps amplify a lot of different aspects of the team, and I think the team is personifying a lot of the values that we hold as a program.

Q. Expectations for the team were pretty low coming into this season, and the team far exceeded them. Going into next season, it feels like the expectations are much higher. What's your thoughts on that?

SAM PRESTI: Same as I said before. We don't really get ourselves lost in those -- if we did last year, why would we bother coming in to work.

The one thing I do think relative to the expectations next year, and I understand that we don't control those, I do think that we still have to remember, as many great things as have happened this year, we still have to finish our breakfast around here and understand that we're not a .500 team.

The season is, say, six or seven months long. We had two really good months where we played exceptionally well, but we didn't play consistently well the entire -- now, no team is going to do that, as I said before. The sky is going to fall on everybody. But can we be more consistent with our best play, would be a great step for us.

But we're not a .500 team.

I think we have the makings of a team that can be good. I also think that we squeeze a lot of improvement into one season, from 20 games to 40 games. Usually it's a 20, 30 -- we're stealing from the future in some way probably a little bit, and so we just have to be at ease with that and understand that.

That's not going to change the process we're in. It's not going to say that we're not going to ultimately achieve what we want to achieve, but we do have to kind of understand that there's a lot of work to do.

I could go into detail as to like all the different facts as to why that might be the case, but I think everybody understands that, that we didn't win half our games.

Q. The play-in tournament has been around for a few years, but this is the first time you guys have participated. What are your overall thoughts on it?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, I think it's a good experience. It's hard because you have a personal experience and then you have like the overall experience. I think it's good for the league. I understand why they did it. I was totally supportive of that when they decided to do it. It makes a lot of sense on a lot of levels.

For us, I thought it was excellent. But probably more valuable -- not more valuable, but on par with the actual

game we played was the last 10 games of the season that we were -- like I said, there's conscious discomfort, right.

I think that's good. It's very hard -- I think probably from the outside looking in there's trepidation. I was like drinking that up because you can observe how we're performing and preparing in these types of situations.

Even if we didn't play our best at certain times, we have to go through that. Very rarely in my experience in the NBA does a team just like knife through butter all the way to their goals. It just doesn't work that way.

The fact that we were in those situations and there were some stakes -- but most of all, we stuck to kind of the mindset that we had initiated from the start of the season to the end. It got us there.

I would be less excited if we started to make all kinds of sacrifices and compromises in order to get there after putting ourselves in such a good position to have a chance.

I think it's the way we managed through it that was the best part of it, and the games themselves were great. It's not a series, so you've got to get that through your mind. The preparation is much different. This was something we had to go through -- I never experienced it before, but a series is a completely different beast, and this is unfortunately, like it's really a tournament of randomness. You've got to live with that.

But that's what makes it exciting, too. We could have very easily found our way through that. It wasn't meant to be, but I think we'll get a lot out of it.

Q. Was there a moment or a stretch of time when -- you told that story last year about when Shai was in the gym the night Russ was traded, you're going to remember that if he turns into something special. Obviously he's done that. Was there a moment you knew he could be this type of player, first team all-NBA caliber?

SAM PRESTI: One specific?

Q. Yeah, if you've got it.

SAM PRESTI: No. I don't really have one like that. I remember a couple things about him, but I don't think they're necessarily like going to lead to this particular question, but my biggest recollections are, one, going to see Kentucky that year.

I saw them a lot because they have so many players. I just remember consistently walking away like, the guy with the

hair -- he had kind of -- I was like, he's in the paint a lot. Like I just kind of like -- but he wasn't starting. It was like, kind of beat me down over time.

Then the other was his first like scrimmage here. We were in the Blue practice facility because we were redoing the floor here, and I happened to be walking along the baseline, one of the baselines to go to talk to somebody, and the guys were playing. CP was here. It was that group -- it was the first time that group had ever been together.

He made like a finish that was, I thought, pretty unique. I was like, oh, you know, that caught my attention. But it wasn't, this guy is going to be an All-Star player. That wasn't it. It was that there's tools there. That was different.

When I was -- I can't remember how old I was, but one day I was driving along, and my phone rang, and it was Jerry Krause. He was older and he was not in great health, but I didn't know him. He asked me to come up to his house in Chicago. I feel comfortable telling this story now. Obviously he's passed away.

So I went to his house, and we just sat together and he had a lot of questions for me. I did not know him. He just wanted to talk ball and scouting. He was telling me, he's like, have you ever -- this guy was a baseball scout, too. He took it so serious, and he was talking about these -- he called them like "electric moments" when you're scouting a player where you see something.

It's a glimpse of something, and you stand up and you look around and you go, I hope that no one else saw that. He's got great stories because he's watched a lot of players and done a lot of things.

I think, like I do kind of understand what he's saying with that. So when Shai made that finish it was like a bit of a buzz, like something is going on here, and then you keep doing the rest of your stuff.

That doesn't mean he's going to be -- I thought he was going to be this great player, and I didn't ever want to act like we had some great that he was going to -- you observe, you watch, you support, you try to create conditions for the players, and I think you challenge.

I do think that's one thing that sometimes in the league today is missing is because the playbook in so many ways is to pit the player against the team in a lot of ways. People are not challenging, and I don't think that's a relationship.

I think a relationship can't be built on appeasement, at least

no relationship that I've seen be successful that way. I think you have to be open. You have to work together. You have to challenge and continually raise the bar.

I think that's the best thing about Shai is like he responds well to that. In the world today, I think it's like the player is a victim of something or the team is a victim, and it's like, when you're in a relationship, you're together in that. You work through things together, and you have to talk about that stuff together, and you might disagree about things, but you've got to have a basis of that.

It starts to me with these great players. They all want to be challenged. I think as soon as you are fearful of that you can't help them get better, and in my mind, what we need to do as an organization all the time is how do we best serve the players.

That doesn't mean fluffy pancakes and car washes. That means how do we help them achieve their potential and what they want out of it, and sometimes there's friction in that.

But I think the playbook today, like I said before, is to try to pit everyone against each other. And like the best organizations I think take that divide or whatever is being -- they squash it. I don't know how I got on to that, but I was just thinking about Shai, and he's so great because he, I think, wants that.

The big thing with him is he's got to be a two-way player to be great. He's got to be -- he took huge strides in that. But he's got to play both sides, and if he becomes a great defender, that's a problem for other people.

I'm really excited to just observe how he continues to improve and then how we can help continue to help him explore his potential, but you've got to do that together.

Q. You might have just answered a follow-up I had, but he's come back every year a better player, and he's talked about how much he works in the off-season. Is it kind of that continued improvement on the defensive end that you're looking for, that he could sort of build upon next year? How could he even be better than he was this year?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, when you have players like that, the better you are, the more ways there are to get better. I think there's a lot of room for him to improve. He's so young.

But things will come. I think that's one other thing about player development, is you've got to let it happen a little bit, too.

I'm fascinated by -- I've become fascinated by two things: editors and music producers. I read this book about Max Perkins, the editor, and it was awesome because it helps you understand, like, he's helping these tremendous talents, F. Scott Fitzgerald and many others, and it's hard to tell them when something isn't to their level, but necessary.

When you have someone that's that talented, there's more coming. There's more in the stew that you can then be more critical of. But the best are like, give me more. But you can't do it all at once. There will be certain layers is my guess that we'll work on with him and he'll figure out what he wants to achieve.

But you have to understand what do they want out of it, and what do you want -- you can't be dictatorial. I think we've learned that over time, and so he'll come back a better player.

I just think defensively if he continues to progress this way it can make him -- there's another dimension.

Q. Everyone talks about culture, and that was really evident a couple days ago with the end-of-season interviews and really the last few years, too. Can you talk about that dynamic?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so I think we've been fortunate, obviously, over the years in that respect. I think that word is like just absolutely abused today. I think it's more environment than it is culture. I don't know. I guess everyone's definition could be different, but I think environment is better because environments change.

I think as good as it is here in terms of like what you're describing, everybody is happy, you see that at least -- not everybody is happy, but they know it's good. The one thing about it that I have always thought about, and I've said this recently to our leadership team here, cultures or environments, they're not static. We've had tough times with that like environmentally.

I think every single situation would have that. I think a lot of times when the team is winning at a high level, their best environmental days are usually prior to that because I think there's a huge difference between a culture of winning and a culture where you can win.

We've always focused on trying to create the best environment for people to be their best selves, but that gets stressed sometimes when you're in an environment like pro sports. It's not going to be perfect all the time.

I think when you realize that it can ebb and flow at times -- yeah, right now I would agree with you. The environment is pretty good. The guys are great. But it doesn't mean we own that because there's going to be periods where that gets stressed.

That doesn't mean you have a bad culture. It means the culture is going through a test of some kind, and I think if you have the right principles, if you have the right ingredients and the right people, you can re-grow out of that, even in times where it seems like, man, this is not the way it was.

Nothing is the way it was. It doesn't go that way.

We'll be tested. There will be tough times. If we have the right group and the right temperament, we'll survive that. We'll be stronger for it.

Like I said, the sky falls twice a year on every team, and you get better as you go through that.

I just think the same thing about environment. We like to say, these people have a great environment. We tend to say that about teams that are winning. But it's much deeper than that in my opinion, and it can go to any business, industry.

There's teams that could be winning, but they may not have a great environment. You don't own it. You try to do your best to curate it, keep it, but it's going to go through tough times. And we've had that ourselves. I don't want to act like everything is perfect. It isn't.

But I do think that over the course of time you can get it right most of the time, but that doesn't mean that you like own this pretty little picture. That's not human. I don't think that's human.

If it looks like that, then I think it's actually your biggest indicator. If they haven't had tough times, there's something else going on. It's The Truman Show.

Q. You talked about drafting the people over the player, and it doesn't seem like that's played out more than it played out this year, especially considering how young the team is and how they could have let their personal agendas get in the way, especially because this is the time that kind of shapes their career. How pleased were you to see that play out that much without -- they've talked about how close they are all year.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it's impressive, I have to say. I think their ability to think for themselves is very, very impressive.

I think they're aligned towards wanting to achieve team goals. That doesn't mean individual goals aren't very important. They are, for everybody. Ambition is important. It just can't overtake the meta goal of team success.

The thing I'm happy about is that a lot of guys did get recognized, right, as a result of those priorities. When we talk about those things openly, which I think is important, the risk is somebody doesn't get what they want, and nobody really gets what they want, but I thought guys were recognized for their contributions, and I'd like to think it was a result because they served the team.

That's one of the things, serving the game, serving the team, making the play that's in front of them naturally.

I think if that continues to become more and more part of our ethos, it only makes the team better, and that's the best basketball. The best basketball is when things are synchronized. You can't get that all the time, though. Like nobody plays 48 minutes.

But if you watch really good teams, they have these pockets of that where the best versions of them, like I said before, and everybody understands their function, nobody is trying to redefine it or expand it, it's really fun to watch, and you can see it. It's also very fun to play.

But that's a hard thing to do in any sport because everyone is a person and you have to manage all these other things. But they've done a nice job with that. They deserve a lot of credit. But they're going to have to -- we all are going to have to double down on, okay, this is kind of where it's at for us to be at our best.

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

SAM PRESTI: I mean, a lot. Age is a number. Age is a number. There's one play that stuck out to me this year with him, and I know when everyone thinks -- when we talk about him it's going to be some wizard pass or -- it's not, because I think when he's at his best he serves the game, and because of his abilities he's able to impact the game in a lot of ways.

We were playing Chicago. It was the very end of the game. I can't remember the possession. I was kind of watching -- I was at a college game, so I was like kind of breaking the rule and kind of looking. It was a close game, so I was kind of looking at the game.

Big possession, huge possession. He holds off Pat Williams and gets the ball, and I think we may have got fouled and gone to the free-throw line after that and closed that game out.

But that rebound was a winning rebound. That was a free-for-all play. That was a nasty play. He held him off.

Those are the plays that serve the game that you make but not a lot of people will probably write about them or tweet about them or highlight them or whatever. That was a big play. I was impressed by that. Just the strength to be able to do that and to understand the importance of that possession and come through like that.

Had another one -- I'm really bad at this. Tracking down that jump ball that Lu won, that's a winning play. Not only doesn't he get a stat for it, but those are the things. Being 6'9" helps, and with really good instincts, that's a good combination.

Q. It appears Chet's recovery is going well, trending well. What are his plans in the off-season?

SAM PRESTI: Just keep progressing. We want him to keep progressing, see how he continues to do. He's moving into like 5-on-5 play, so he's in a good spot. We just don't want to obviously get ahead of ourselves. We have no reason to do that.

But he think he's in a great spot in terms of what he's been able to accomplish.

Again, I think everybody learned a lot this season, like I said. That's the key to the year for us is the rate of learning. But for him, he learned a ton because you're going from just the day-to-day approach that's necessary to come back from something like that is one thing.

Walking into a building where you're seeing everything else that you want happen in front of you every day and still stay that consistent, not many people do that. I feel good about that one. He's got a mind that's different on that level.

We're going to have to do a lot of work on, you know, eat the bread in slices, not the whole loaf at one time, build the house slowly, because he's so driven. But that's a good thing to have to help cultivate over time.

Q. Will he play Summer League?

SAM PRESTI: It's possible. We'll see when we get to that point. If he's at that point where we feel good about making that decision -- I wouldn't say he wouldn't. It's very possible that he does, but he's got a lot of time between now and then.

He'll want to play for sure because he'll play anywhere,

anytime. It's just a matter of if it's the right thing for him physically at that point.

The other thing I'd just add about that is like the hardest thing in my experience with these jobs that I've encountered are the injuries. I don't mean what they do to the team, but like for the players. I've been in too many doctors' offices, too many exam rooms, and when these guys go down with injuries, I just wish people could see the devastation, how much these guys care.

They're really warriors. These guys are warriors. They are warriors.

So when one of them is taken out of their ability to do that, man, it's a crusher for me. Like that's the hardest thing I've probably had to -- I don't do well with that because I just don't like seeing -- it's hard. I care about the guys, obviously, as people.

But Eric Maynor's was hard. We were in Atlanta and I just remember seeing him on the table. It was just brutal.

Chet's was tough.

Serge's, we were across the street. Now, he had the most miraculous return from an injury I've ever seen in my life, but it was like a movie where you think someone is -- and they kind of pop up. It was crazy.

We put a press release out the season was over, and Pop got all over me when he came back. I was like, we really thought the season was over. We put the press release out. So I don't know what happened.

Serge is superhuman, but we thought his calf had like exploded, and it did.

The injuries are tough. Obviously we've been through them with a lot of guys at a lot of different levels of the team, but it humanizes the players.

Like I said before, the players are the most important thing. There's a reason why the middle of our building is designed to have the court in the middle, because the players are what make it go. It's what makes the league go. They're incredible competitors, and they have a short amount of time to do this.

But at the same time, you've still got to challenge them and be with them. But when they're injured, it's hard. Chet was a hard one because I think he knew something was wrong pretty quickly.

Q. When Chet did go down, all eyes were kind of on



the 12th pick, Jalen Williams. Can you talk about your expectations for him then, and then did you expect him to be a potential Rookie of the Year?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I'll always say this: I don't know. None of us know. You try to shift the odds in your favor and make quality decisions, but there's a lot more to it than watching guy on film. I will say that.

Part of it's like, there's a difference between evaluating if a player can play and knowing how to use the player. Those are two different conversations.

The other part about evaluation is that what's going on in an evaluators mind, because there's so much bias in the evaluator himself or herself, so they could be walking into things already thinking a certain way.

What's the process leading up to the evaluation? How consistent is that? Are you just popping it on? Are you doing the same thing every time? How are you documenting? How do you know how well you're doing? What kind of notes are you keeping? Are they being measured some type of way like empirically?

There's a vast concept to player evaluation, and the reason why there's all these different aspects that you try to optimize for is because it's so random, because at the end of the day, nobody really -- I don't think anybody really knows better than anybody else.

I think there's a lot of components and factors that go into it, and with J-Dub, we made what we thought was the best decision for the team, but then a lot of other things have to take place for that to get to this point, and we're only one year in.

Just because we've had a good first year with him doesn't mean the second year is promised to go the same way. I would caution that because in the beginning of this year, there was a lot of people that were very concerned about Josh's play, and again, there's -- regression is welcomed. Resistance is welcomed. That's how you improve.

Now, again, I think it's okay to be a fan and overreact to things. That's part of being a fan. I'm a fan of other sports.

But you've got to have clear thinking when it comes to player evaluation and player observation. These guys are going to get better, and they may slow down, and they may get better, and they may struggle, and they'll go through different things and they'll respond to them.

You've got to do your best to kind of just watch it happen and understand it -- try to understand it accurately. That's

the key is understanding is accurately.

Q. He also has a real, I want to say, like bubbly yet carefree type of personality. How much do you think that plays into his success on the court? It's like he's playing like that on the court, as well.

SAM PRESTI: But I think it all goes together. So again, I think it would be impossible to watch a player on film and like make a determination of how good they are without knowing or meeting the person. I mean, you're missing maybe the most important part of the evaluation.

Yeah, if you don't know the human component, I think you're missing the majority of what can go on inside a player.

Jalen specifically, I think his personality does make a difference. I think he has a certain disposition or temperament. Most impressive thing to me about him, and I know everybody else has different opinions of it, he plays with great effort on both sides of the ball and he goes hard.

I don't think people should ever take that for granted. If he's still bringing that level of force and effort three and four years in, he'll be a significantly better player than people think he will be now.

I think he's a smart guy. I think he understands that, and I think he understands how hard it is to do that every night. But he got off to a great start. He got off to a great start with that.

All the other stuff is great, but there's certain things that are worth more in my opinion, and that's one of them. You mentioned what were expectations. Professional habits. When we get a first-year player, that's our primary focus is we want to get them professional Thunder habits.

We can't really start with much past that, but we've got to get that in place. Harder for some guys than others. Other guys just like slide right in, and they're born here.

But I think we can show that we can work with anybody if they'll work with us. You know, that doesn't mean they're going to turn out to be a really good player, but we can help them, and I think hopefully help them have long careers after, even if they're not playing here for the rest of their career.

Q. You talked a lot about the things that can get in the way of young teams like during the time period of the season. After kind of being ahead of the beat, as you've said earlier, there are some things that are different in the off-season that you guys are going to

have to be really focused on maintaining that same mental discipline.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I mean, that's a big part of it. Those guys are -- they'll do their own thing. They'll come back here. We'll find out who's improved. We'll find out how that fits into the construct of the team.

I mentioned the music producer thing, I'm really into this because I like music documentaries and I love the ones about how the songs and albums get made. I think there's a good analogy there of every year we're going to come back, the team is going to be different because guys are going to get better.

If you have a big soundboard in front of you, like George Martin, Brian Eno, these are the guys that I'm really into. And Quincy Jones, another one. You can't have everybody turned up to 11 like in Spinal Tap. It just doesn't work that way.

Sometimes in order to get the best component out of the team someone might have to come down a little bit for someone else to come up. You can play all the right notes, but the song may not sound good.

I'd like to see us continue -- I think Mark and the guys are so -- they're so invested in this, and I think it bodes so well for us finding the right balance as the team continues to grow and depending on who's on the floor with one another.

But that's not like a static thing. That's a changing thing. That's the beauty to me of watching and observing the team, is to see how we can continue to do that.

But it's no different than figuring out you can't have one thing cranked so loud that nothing else can work; you know what I mean?

I think the play style that we're -- the ideal we're chasing with that I think is a fun thing to try to figure out, but it's not something that you can just master.

The good thing I think is we have good improvisational players, which helps, and so they can absorb -- I think the guys did a great job absorbing Jalen's emergence. Chet is going to come into the fold next year.

Like I said, we go back to square one. We'll have to continue to kind of observe and figure out how to mix that well. At the end of the day it's not about getting the best personal performance, it's about getting the best performance of the team with everyone playing well.

Q. Seeing Chet go down in the off-season, how were you able to not panic after that happened?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I think probably temperament and experience. I mentioned the injury thing. I mean, the first thing is it's tough for the guys. Like it's really tough for the guys because it's just crushing. I can't put that into words for you.

But then you also have to move on with the team, so it's a tricky thing there, too, because you can't have the team looking back. They have to move forward.

But I think just being in enough situations, seeing how this goes, I mean, you wait for more information -- I guess I don't want to be dispassionate about it, but for me, my temperament is give me the information and then we'll fork from there.

We can't change what happened, but you can also be very disappointed for the person because this is their passion. It's what they love to do.

But I'd say probably temperament. We've been in a lot of tight spots over the course of time, and I think through temperament, optimism, belief in one another as an organization from top to bottom, we feel like we'll figure out what's next and how to implement that and not really get caught up in like all the different things that could go wrong. Let's get the next thing right, figure out how to operate from here.

To be honest with you, that was making sure we got to the right medical opinion and the right information and the right plan and go from there.

Q. One more on J-Dub. I know he was like a late riser, but a lot of the even projected first-round picks don't play 5-on-5 in the combine, and Mark talked about seeing him do that. When I asked J-Dub about it he's like, I didn't even know any better. I didn't know some guys didn't do this. Did that stand out to you, and what do you remember from watching him play competitive games?

SAM PRESTI: I hate this because I buzz kill every question that you ask, but I've got to tell you the truth. My feeling on this is you can't control who plays, who doesn't play, what you get to see, what you don't get to -- you work with what you've got. I guess it was nice that he played. More information. If he didn't play I wouldn't have held that against him.

It's always good to see the guys compete. You'd always prefer to see that. But we don't control that. So it's like,

can't bend the world to be as you want it to be. You have to either work with the world as it is or get crushed by it.

Hey, he played, that was great. It probably helped us. But meeting him was a big factor, and the interview process I think is important, the visits, those types of things, or being able to go out and visit the player. Just meeting the people I think does make a difference.

But I don't think it played like a huge factor. It's like, show me what we've got to work with and let's see if we can get the right priority for the guys who will be the best Thunder players.

Q. I don't know if you can even talk about it, but if you can, what are your thoughts on the new CBA?

SAM PRESTI: I can't talk about it until it gets approved, and it's in the process of that. The only thing I do feel comfortable saying about it is that I think the NBA and the Players Association have shown what it should look like or what it can look like to have that type of leadership, because this was not an easy thing to do and they did it, and I think they did it with a really impressive level of collaboration and spirit.

I can't comment on what's in it, but I can just say that like I think we're fortunate to have the leaders of those two entities working together because you can't take that for granted. I think they found a way to do something that is best for everybody.

Q. You had some guys get hurt taking charges in the first week of the Playoffs. There's some talk they should amend what a charge is. You've got one of the best in the league in taking charges. What's your thoughts? Do you like the way it is?

SAM PRESTI: Well, again, I think what happens in the NBA is we watch thousands and thousands and thousands of games, but when we get to the Playoffs, everyone is watching the same games.

So the group-think is like multiplied by like a million, and when things happen -- I think probably these same things are happening throughout the season, or maybe if it happens to a profile player it gets reacted to a little bit more.

When one of our guys during the season steps on the cameraman and twists his ankle we're not calling for rule changes, but I think if it happened on a primetime game, maybe.

The only thing I'd say about that is -- and I don't know how

much easier you want to try to make it for the offense. We've taken away every potential thing. Unless we just want to have a 5 on 0 game and see who shoots the best. At some point you're going to need to have the defense play and be allowed to play.

I understand like you could also make the argument that maybe guys will not go in the paint quite as much because we're taking the obstacles away is what I'm saying, and so -- this is nothing to do with J-Will.

We've had calls, we've had a lot of charge takers over the years, but I just think it's less of -- if we need to do that for some reason, fine, but I think it's more a question of how many more limitations are we going to place on the defense. That's a real question for the league. What kind of game do you want to have. Is it an offensive game with a little bit of defense, or do you want it balanced where both sides of the ball are being able to play a certain way?

But I know what will happen is this will get -- if there's enough -- the medium matters more than the message. If it's made its way to social media strong enough, it's going to get talked about because that's the name of the game. So I'm sure there will be meetings about taking away this thing.

But hopefully we can find ways to help the defense be a part of basketball, too.

Q. Can you talk about Ousmane Dieng and his season?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, it was a little choppy because the middle of the season he had the injury. The one thing I feel comfortable saying about him -- we're early days with him. We all understand it's going to have to be a longer period of observation because of his age. He's Poku age. That's how early in the league he was.

He takes challenges. He left France and went to New Zealand. He entered the NBA at an extremely young age, being a player that doesn't speak perfect English.

I like that. I like the fact that he's taken challenges, he's taken risks, and he's bet on his own being.

We'll see where that leads us. It's a big summer for him. But these are guys that are going to look significantly different over time, physically, and that's also game-wise.

I thought he got better as the season went along, but like all of our guys, he has a lot to work on.

But he knows where the ball should go pretty easily, like in



terms of his cognition of the game. It's high. The processing speed is high. It's just, we have to continue to help build a whole player, and he has to put the work in, and he has to challenge himself.

But I've noticed that he will put himself in those situations. The easiest thing for him to do last year would have been not to go to New Zealand, to stay in France, where things probably would have been made a lot easier for him. So I like the path that he's taking because it's definitely not the least resistance, and we're big on that.

Q. When you talk about style of play, talk about less pattern, more rhythm, just what are your thoughts on the progress, like kind of toward that style of play that Mark and the guys made this year?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I feel like I've hit it a few times, but it's definitely progress. I think some of the shooting numbers are a little bit indicative of that because we're getting quality shots, but they're coming -- they're makeable because people are anticipating the ball is going to be there.

It's not the first time they touch the ball, know what I mean? I think the mixing board example I gave you -- I should have saved that for this question if I knew this was coming.

The mixing board example is finding the balances within the guys with a changing team as the guys keep getting better, because as I said before, the J-Dub we saw at the beginning of the year is different than the end.

The Shai we saw at the beginning of the year is different at the end.

These guys are all going through development and change.

That's why we felt that giving that -- doubling down on those opportunities was important so that we could continue to get more information about where they are and then how do we best deploy them and in what structure so that they can -- so that everybody is playing well at the same time versus like one guy is playing well, but in order for him to play well, no one else can play well.

We want it to be everybody playing well at the same time, in the more modern NBA.

You know, you can make the argument that the team we have right now wouldn't have been a very good team in the NBA six or seven years ago, and you could take the teams that were in the NBA six or seven years ago and put them in the NBA today and they may not be very good, because

the NBA is always changing. It's always changing. That's the great thing about it is that the players change the game.

We'll have to keep riding that and not -- my big thing is don't try to like box that in or put a bow on it. That's the beauty of the team we have. We have a lot of different guys that know how to play, that have good natural basketball instincts, that are pretty good sized. We can put them in a lot of different situations. We want them to think on their own. We think Mark is really great about that.

But we also have this ideal of playing really quality basketball, but they have to kind of figure that -- I think Mark has done a great job. He lets them play. He really does. But he wants to continue to teach them how to read and react to different situations, and that's not just the actual, like -- the pattern of the game is like more fixed.

The rhythm is just kind of the way that the players are interacting with each other, where it doesn't have to be fixed. I think it helps that we have some of the guys that can decide where things should be going based on what's happening on the floor.

That's really helpful, and that's scalable. The patterns are not scalable. They're not as adaptable. They're rote.

I think the world that we're in also reflects the way the game is played. You know what I'm saying? The society we live in is a reflection -- the sport is a reflection of the society we live in in a lot of ways. We played very small a lot of times this year, and believe it or not, most of the time the other team played small with us.

When you talk about the development of our players, a big part of the development of our players -- if you looked at where some of the guys took off, J-Dub specifically, Josh a little bit, Isaiah, it's when we started playing smaller.

Some of the stylistic focus is also to drive development.

I thought having Horford here for the time that he was here really accentuated Shai's development because it gave him a different look on the floor. I thought when we started playing K-Rich at 5, that's when J-Dub's development really started to take off.

I know we'd like to have the perfect team and have all the size in the world and we could have twin towers plus be able to -- we're working on that. I don't know that that's really realistic, but it's good to have high expectations.

But a lot of the improvement of the season was through the experiment of playing small, which then drove the player

development pretty far, and I don't know that we would have found some of that if we were like nope, we have to do this.

The other thing we learned by trying that, and Mark would always say this to me, is people match up with us because when we were playing Minnesota, we rebounded the hell out of the ball. Like we were -- we had Karl Towns on J-Dub. That's good for us on most nights.

I think people still watch basketball like we were taught to watch basketball like a long time ago. Big, small, they must rebound, they must not. The game is not that anymore. Can't help people if that's how they see it.

We got our ass kicked on the boards in New Orleans, but no one was talking about the size there because we won. We won because we stayed consistent with certain things and we had some good fortune along the way. It's like, that's how games are won and lost.

But I do think that the player development is aided by, A, the rhythms, and then also who's on the floor to help these guys play a different type of game and explore their game.

Probably at some point in time, they're going to have to learn how to play with different type of bigs on the floor. Probably. But early on, I think, to get us moving and to get the rhythms that we're talking about, very important. And also we're not -- we're going to our third draft, so we can't have everything perfect.

In general, we're a work in progress. We're going to be a work in progress for a while. One, because like I said before, we're not a .500 team, but also because the team is so young that we're going to keep learning about the guys and having to figure out how to modify and adjust.

I think what Mark has done is he hasn't put a cap on it because of the play style, which is, I think, very helpful.

Q. You've got a World Cup coming up, Olympic qualifying, obviously Shai is a critical player for Canada. How important is that piece of what he's about to go through for his development as maybe possibly going to the next level?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I think diversity of experiences, playing experiences is positive. I think it also has to come at the right time in the player's career.

It's their choice, at the end of the day. We don't have jurisdiction to say, you're not playing. But certain guys, if you're trying to get your career started or you're trying to build certain type of habits or you're trying to work on

certain things, that may take priority over the competitive diversity.

But Shai is going to play if he wants to play. I'm not positive where he'll end up on that, so I don't want to speak for him. But diversity of play is good. Different situations, different systems, I don't see that as a negative at all.

Again, I think shocking yourself and stressing your team, stressing yourself is a positive thing, as long as you know you have a baseline to come back to.

If you're just kind of a Jackson Pollock-like version of a basketball player, that's a tough thing. You can keep your bags packed; you're going to be a journeyman. You've got to have some identity that you know this is what I do to play well. That's a thing I learned from Collison. This is what I do to play well, or I play well here, and this is why.

I think those are really important things for guys to understand as their career goes along. The diversity is great as long as you have that sense of self as a player.

Q. We saw how important the G-League was this year, particularly with J-Will playing so well with the Blue and in the second half being a valuable member of the Thunder. What's it like seeing the synergy between these two programs? Also, you mentioned before about the G-League and the Blue playing in the Paycom. Is there any resolution there?

SAM PRESTI: The second question I'm going to defer on that.

But we're doing our best.

The first part of that, I mean, at this point for us, we don't even see the -- it's the same thing. It's like, there's no thin line.

So it's great because half of our Thunder staff has probably come from the Blue. We have a lot of players. Obviously, our head coach is probably our best example of that, and he truly, I think, had a huge advantage having been a head coach there, and in our organization, but also just a lot of reps.

J-Will did a good job down there. Ous did an awesome job down there before the season, before he got injured.

It's a regular thing to play there for us. It's a normalized thing. Tre Mann was there. Did a great job at the showcase. I think guys understand that for us, that's like part of the development process, and an important one, because we want to see, again, competitive diversity, like

how can you do in these situations.

I love it. I think it's a great thing.

I do think that the G-League has a lot of potential that is unrealized, and I do think that in the future if we're going to -- if the age would ever change, I do think getting the G-League even more robust and maybe stronger could be a huge opportunity. I'm a huge fan of it. I just think there's more there that we could all do for that.

Q. You mentioned Isaiah a few times didn't really have the opportunity in Philadelphia; got that here. What was it like for you to see him to take off given that opportunity?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, happy for him for a lot of reasons. One, he just got a good -- I think he's a good example of has the right mentality. He came in confident but not impatient, because if you're a confident person you usually have some patience because you're not worried about losing -- your success doesn't seem quite as elusive to you.

He's like, all right. I'll wait. Eventually I'm going to get a shot, and he did. He showed a lot of professionalism early on.

Then when he got his opportunity, he played well. But he also plays physical. He does things that drive winning. He'll take a charge as long as those will be allowed in the future.

But he'll take a charge. He'll get a rebound. He keeps the ball moving. But he finds volume threes, which with our -- the makeup of our team you'd like to think that if you can find the space, someone is going to see it.

It's a really hard argument for some of our guys. Josh Giddey can't come to the huddle and say, I didn't see you. You saw him. Like you can see everything.

Like I think those types of guys like to play. Like we should be able to maximize those types of guys.

When we drafted Josh and even some of the other guys, I mentioned that why we were doing that was because we thought -- you can go back and check my words. We didn't how good he'd be, but we thought he could help the play style and amplify potential additions in the future, and I think that helps. The play style obviously helps.

But Isaiah's confidence I think was -- and his patience with the process was key.

Q. With Poku, his season was derailed by injury. He's still so young, so it's hard to get a good idea with him. But now during the last year of his rookie deal, can you kind of tell us where you're at with him now that a decision is coming soon?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, you know what's interesting about that is if you were to probably go through the first part of the season and say, okay, what are the storylines of the first 30 games of the season, Poku 100 percent probably would have been one of the top three, four, just based on my anecdotal sense of things.

Then you get to the end of the year and so many other things have happened that you kind of forget the progress that he made.

That's not a criticism of anybody. It's just we're getting lathered with so much information all the time that you kind of -- things don't stick quite as much. He had a great year. He put himself in position through the summertime and he was starting for us the first night.

That was after -- I don't know how I would say he was doing at that point because it's such -- it's a different process with those types of guys in my opinion. I think we're going to need a lot of time -- I would have told you like in four years we might know.

But we've got to put him in all these situations. He's responded very well. I think I said that in the past. He's responded well to a lot of circumstances, G-League assignments; he always came back better. He had a couple injury things. He's bounced back from things. His maturity is significantly different. I think he's more comfortable. His defense was on a different plane than we had seen the last time when he started -- when he came in here, he was protecting the rim a little bit for us.

So very happy for him. I think he'll play national team, which I think, to Cliff's point, I think that's a good thing for him, and we'll see where it is.

But he's made -- his progress is interesting because within the seasons he's always had some choppy area because he's so young, but by the end of the season you could always say he's gotten better.

Even with a very short amount of time he played this year, it's very clear he is a better player now than he was when he started the season. I'm happy with him. And he's stuck with it. That's not easy to do.

Q. You have four first-round draft picks next summer, which is in a way a ticking clock. Does the



improvement and development and blossoming of this team change your outlook in any way on what you might do just in the next calendar year as it refers to those four? If you hadn't had some of the development of Santa Clara or Joe or whoever, your team might not be as far along. But those things did happen. You are better than we thought, maybe whether you thought or not. Does that change what you might do in the near future with decision making?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, fair question. I think the first thing I would say is that that's a long time away. Obviously we've got to get through this draft, get to the next draft, and we don't even know if all those picks will convey, but I certainly would probably want to know where they would be. Houston, Utah, Clippers, ours. You said there was four so I trusted you. There's four.

And so you'd like to know a little bit more about where those potentially could be. This is the way I look at the -- I anticipated that someone would ask this question. Not the exact one you asked, but just like what do you do with the draft picks, because someone asks that every year.

The way I would look at this is if you think one day you want to buy a house, okay. You don't know where it's going to be, but you want to buy a house. You don't go out and buy the paint for it now. You'd rather wait to see where is the house? How much paint do I need? What color? I'm going to have blue paint. I'm going to buy 10 cans -- we need to know what the house looks like before we start thinking about, like, the cosmetics in my opinion.

We might know a little more after another 82 games, and if we're fortunate enough to get to the postseason we'll know more information. We'll also know more about those potential draft picks.

But I think we have to -- for me, I'd like to see the team -- I'd like to think that we won't have to look outside of the team to get a little better than we are now. But this is -- as I said before, a lot has been accomplished in a short amount of time. To be where we are from where we started after two drafts, I'm very pleased with the players and the coaches.

But we still are under .500.

We're going to be one of the youngest teams in the league, and we have a lot more work to do internally.

The more we do, the more understanding we'll have as to what potentially we might want to do to complement, but we are introducing a new player next year in Chet.

I think we have to be willing to observe that and not predict, oh, this is exactly what we need to do.

Having those draft picks, even if on paper it says, well, we don't have enough spots for them, that's a problem everybody would like to have. That's like saying, walking into a store and saying, I have too much money. I have a problem here.

So I would say, we'll definitely figure that out. If the players are as good as you're saying, that's even better. But I'd still like to know what we're adding.

I use the Jeff Green example all the time, which is we had a nice team, a good team. We were a 50-win team, on our way to another 50-win -- but we could tell that we struggled in that era of basketball.

It's funny because if you took that team and put it now, people would be saying different things about it. They wouldn't be saying, you're too small. They'd be saying, this is a really good modern team.

But we played certain teams, and that team, as good as it was as a 50-win level team, it just had limitations against certain teams. We needed some adjustments and modifications, but they were very clear what it was that we needed because we had seen it enough -- we had a game of our own that you could identify with.

Our competency showed our flaws.

I'd like to be in a position where I could say that. I think we've got a lot of things we need to work on. I think it's hard to say that there's one that we could go out and just say, oh, this is going to fix this.

And then there's also just the organic nature of having to go through things and gain experiences to understand what we're even trying to accomplish. I know there's a lot there.

The last thing I'd say on that is we've done a lot of -- so we've built teams from the bottom. We've had to build a team from the middle. I think that was probably the hardest thing was when we lost Kevin and we were still -- that's a hard spot to try to move the NET rating up from.

We've also had to sustain teams. We've traded away draft picks, quite a few. We still owe some to Atlanta. We've traded for draft picks. We've hit the buy-out market. I think Derek Fisher was one of the best buy-out market adds that we've seen in a long time. He stayed with us for a couple of years. We've used extend-and-trade. We've softly transitioned a lot of different things through the last 15

years.

I'm confident that we'll know how to transition this particular dynamic, but one of the things that I've learned over the years through experiences, you just can't map it out so strictly that you think you have -- you'll be able to anticipate what you're going to need.

You kind of have to let that reveal itself, otherwise you're taking a pretty big risk, because A, you're giving things up in advance, but B, you could also be compromising the growth or development of somebody else or stifle what you have already.

It's very delicate. I just think it's a super delicate analysis.

Q. When you have future draft picks and some of them have restrictions on them, you talked about you'd like to know what they are before you trade for them --

SAM PRESTI: Not totally but big picture.

Q. I would assume the team you're going to trade with would like to know that, too, but in some ways, how do you balance the fact that right now, first-round draft pick from Houston even with the top-four protection, that gets people interested?

SAM PRESTI: I think it's less that. I think it's less the know where they are. We'll play risk. I think we've shown that. One thing we're not is scared. That is not the problem.

It's more what do we know about the team and being able to say, hey, this is what we do need. We know enough about the team, but if we were to do that at the beginning of the year, we wouldn't know about Isaiah Joe, we wouldn't know about J-Will, J-Dub might not be in the position he's in right now.

I think we have to be careful about premeditating some of that. Does that mean we would never consider -- of course not. We consider everything. We look at everything. We're always considering those things and talking about those things.

But I think for the most part, it's hard to predict the needs, because once you use it, it's very hard to go back to that. And also I think there's a -- you could also be compromising what you have.

The other big aspect of that, and I can't go into great detail, is a new CBA. So the value of those assets potentially, especially if the costs of our team goes up, those assets are extremely valuable because they're cost controlled and

they're retainable.

It's also a bit of an economic equation where you'd like to see -- I remember my first couple years here we were in a similar situation and everybody wanted us to give the max to David Lee or Ben Gordon, and we decided not to do that and we still had a hard time keeping the team together financially.

But if we had done that, it would have been, forget it. It would have been -- nobody would have been able to predict the development of some of the guys we had. It just took off for us.

Then just the way that the -- that the CBA got written, unfortunately for the Thunder, it wasn't good.

This way going forward, I think we have to see, obviously, if we have those types of economic crunches, but if we do, having the additional draft cap will be important to fielding a team. I think that's going to be important to consider, too.

Q. That said, are there any circumstances that could lead you guys to use cap space this summer?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I mean, again, I want to be careful because of the CBA conversation. We've got to let that happen.

I mean, we look at everything. We'll look at everything. But we're not -- we've generally been pretty conservative with how we've approached that and looked at ways to use it that may not be as orthodox.

I think that's for us, like that's probably the way that we always look through the cap space, with that kind of a lens, because you want to get maximum value out of whatever assets you're deploying, and space is an asset.

So how do you maximize the value of that asset? Well, it might be different in certain situations than others.

But we're not going to -- there's no like hard and fast. Like I said before, saying to Barry, we've transitioned, we've been in a lot of situations. Like just because we're in this particular situation now and the way that we're managing doesn't mean that we've only done it this way.

I think we've done it a lot of different ways, it's just been over a long period of time. Cap space for us has always been looked at through how do we get the most value out of it. It's not always by just like signing X player. But we'll see. Eventually that might be the case. I would never shut off anything. I think that would be unwise.

Q. How much do you weigh the current most recent product when making draft decisions, especially as it seems like a core is starting to materialize?

SAM PRESTI: You mean like the current team?

Q. Yeah.

SAM PRESTI: I mean, it all factors in. I hate to be vague about these things because like it's not intentional, but it's just for me, it's a combination of left and right brain all the time, and I think you've got to be able to operate both ways.

I think the key is can you go left and right brain, but more importantly, do you know when to deploy each side. But I think if you're operating in one space with one limit, one way, I think you're shut off, and the nuances of bringing all that stuff together, the current team, the player that you're adding, the personal component, the analytical component, the strategic component, all that stuff factors in. That's what I like about it.

But the processes are really just means to identify the best options, and then you have to pick one. Everything goes through that kind of process, but it's not just like a concrete process and it's not just a subjective process. I think you've got to be able to play in both of those worlds to come out with good judgment.

Good judgment I don't think is a result of expertise. I think it's like experience and the ability to toggle between soft and hard skills, and that's -- what you're touching on is really the nuance of that in what we do.

It's a little bit of everything.

Q. At least from the outside perspective, Lindy went from kind of a feel-good story as the local guy who signs with the local team and now he's playing important minutes in a play-in game. He's got a team option, I think, for next year. What have you thought of his path and also moving forward?

SAM PRESTI: I always say those are the paths that we like. We're not a yellow brick road program. He's done a great job. I remember him showing up for open gym and like had a hard time getting into games. He's just done a great job.

He's a good player, and I think he's figured out how to play well here. He's figured that out.

He's not totally reliant on other players to help him, but he's figured out how to rely on the system to give him

opportunities, which is a skill, in my opinion. But it shows you there's guys everywhere that can play. Like opportunities is key in the NBA. It really is.

Q. When it comes to players, you'll hear different observations, different discourse from draft people, scouts, media members in this room and others about what a Thunder guy is and we try to make inferences based off like common parallel lines. But I want to know from your perspective how would you describe what a Thunder guy is as a basketball player?

SAM PRESTI: It's a hard question for me because I can't -- I'd love to answer it, but I don't think -- I'm not very concise in these moments anyway. This could be a bad one. This could really waste time.

I don't know. The other thing about it is I hate talking like that because it comes across like so righteous and like well, it's a certain type of guy. Good person, right. Same values. Hardworking, reliable, open-minded, can kind of get over themselves and see how they can fit with the team, give themselves up a little bit. But also still an individual, because I do think you need these personalities that are different.

We've had some personalities that have been different. I do think you've got to embrace the guys and their idiosyncrasies and their differences, but you should never shy away from that I don't think.

But you want those things, and then I think resilience are important. That's another important thing.

But those guys just aren't walking around everywhere. They're hard to find, and you don't need all of them, either. Sometimes if you have someone that has that and another guy on the team that doesn't but they have something the other guy doesn't have, that's what a team is. A team is a group of people working together to solve that day's adversity, and you need a lot of different people to do that.

Q. Are there any new updates on a new arena since the last time you spoke to us?

SAM PRESTI: You know, the answer to that is no. That's really a Mayor Holt thing, so I'd really defer to him. I know he's talked about it a little bit publicly, but I don't want to like step out of my lane on that. It's really his thing.

I commend him because he's thinking forward about the future of the city, and I think that's what's driving his focus on that. But I don't want to talk about that without -- he's the one that needs to speak about it, I think.

Q. Auburn's Jaylin Williams declared for the draft. Is there any way...(indiscernible)

SAM PRESTI: Well, we have all these draft picks next year. I definitely can't touch that because of the rules, but I understand where you're going with that, and it's duly noted.

Q. Have you found any advantages to having two guys with the same name? Were there any situations where other teams were confused?

SAM PRESTI: Oh, that part. No, but one thing that is absolutely critical to teams and especially in the NBA is humor. I think you've got to have some humor, and that has added a fair amount.

Now, at a certain point it starts to turn. It starts to get a little tiresome I think for them. But it's definitely brought some humor, and I think the way you deal with difficult circumstances and stuff like that, at some point you've got to laugh about them, and those guys -- I mean, J-Will walks around with a smile, and it's plastered on. He's smiling all the time.

Those two guys kind of have a good time with it. But it's mostly everybody else, but it's fun. It's unique. We haven't had that before.

Q. What are your thoughts on Lu Dort's season? He obviously struggled finishing at the rim and other aspects of his game, but then you get down to the last 10 games, like you said, you just really see his imprint.

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, he's such an important guy for us.

I the thing I've impressed with Lu about is I think he realizes his function, like I was saying earlier. I think he realizes how important his physical presence is, his defense, his courage.

I will say, and you've never really heard me say this before about individual awards or anything like that because I don't think they're -- it's hard because we're biased. I think all our guys should win all the awards. But I mean, there are some people not watching the games if he's not an all-defensive player because if you talk to the coaches, he's the one keeping them up at night, and he does it in a way that's so consistent and not flamboyant.

You know, I want him to feel recognized for that because we're going to need him to continue to be that guy, and it's like anything else, if you're chopping wood all day and you don't get any type of pat on the back, you know, we've got to keep him going on that because our team is drastically

different without his defense.

We're not a top-10 defense, we're not a top-10 offense. He's not going to be the reason we're a top-10 defense, but he's the reason why we're even hovering around it. We're going to need the rest of the team to drag us into the top 10. I think he's carrying more than enough.

But if you just watch him night tonight or you have to game plan for him -- now, I can understand if you're watching a million games and you're just like -- it's hard to watch.

But he's a guy that you have to prepare for every single game when you play us. I know enough coaches in the league, and they all have a couple of same things they always say to us about -- they always say the same thing, and one of them is his name, always.

I just like the way he goes about it, too. There's no pretense to him. He's not complaining all the time.

We say we don't want the guys complaining. Well, he's not complaining, but he's also not getting the recognition.

But he's a true competitor, man. That guy, he's a true competitor. I know Mark uses all types of different phrases. I forget what they are. But he's a tough guy.

Q. The last few drafts have had sporadic odds. This year you have I think an 85% chance of (indiscernible). Does that change your approach at all?

SAM PRESTI: No, because as I've said the last two years, this is so random. The year that we moved back, I did my media beforehand because if we would have happened to move back and then I came back and said, don't worry, we're right where we want to be, nobody would have believed me.

I think you have to have humility in the face of volatility and randomness, and you have to accept it for what it is.

Maybe we'll get extraordinarily lucky. The odds are very, very sharply against that. I wouldn't plan on it.

But certainly no -- when we ended up where we were last year, we certainly weren't taking any victory laps because we had nothing to do with that. I think you just have to always recognize how little you really control, we really have over a lot of things.

So one of the things that I was talking to someone that called me recently for some advice on something, and I basically said, the job is you have to have able to deal with aftermath. Aftermath. Get good at that. Recognize what

that is, because that's essentially what you're working with is aftermath, the aftermath of whatever it is that takes place. You have to come in and you have to organize, inspire, strategize, and ultimately lead out of that, and that can be good or bad.

There's aftermath to success, too, because people start to forget that maybe not everything was their doing. Got to deal with aftermath, whatever it is, that comes our way. But we'll deal with whatever the outcomes are, and then we'll just go to work and do what we always do and try and make the best decisions.

Q. The last couple of years the team has been the youngest team and they've had to learn and grow on the fly, but Mark is also a young coach to have to learn and grow on the fly. Is there a specific area of growth that you've seen in his coaching style or just him, period?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, probably a lot. The hard thing for me with that one is I've known Mark so long. I remember him like we were -- you remember the beginnings of your relationships, so it's a long time ago. I've watched him develop so much.

But the best thing about him -- not the best thing, one of the best things is I think he has awareness of the things he wants to continue to improve at. I think it's what makes him good. It's matriculated him from where he started to where he is. I think it will continue to help him. The reps of just being in these situations, games, decisions, plans, things like that, it's just really, really helpful because he's just gathering more and more of these experiences and I think churning them into wisdom in a lot of ways.

I don't have one specific thing, but I mean, I think he realizes that -- I think he's good at understanding the sequence of building out a team, that it takes a lot of time, and sometimes if you just reach for the closest lever, you're shutting off all your opportunity.

So being able to kind of wait and watch that, and even if it's failing, okay, what are we learning from that and not overreacting. He could have done that the first -- as I said, I think we were only two months over .500, so there's the majority of the season we were under .500 months-wise, obviously.

There could have been a million different ways to try to shortcut that or not be as flexible at like learning more, but we would have probably not ended up where we ended up, and so I understand sometimes people can't understand that way of thinking and they just don't follow the bouncing ball to that point.

That's not something I'm really that concerned about, you know what I mean? The perception of what we do or how we do it says more about the individual than it does about us, because everyone is perceiving it through their own history, psychology, whatever.

We're just trying to -- we've been very open about what we're trying to do and why. That doesn't mean it's right, but it's not -- I don't think it's -- if you can't understand it, I think it's more because of the way you think than it is about the way we think.

Q. Going back to -- you talked about meeting him in Florida, he had no high-level playing experience whatsoever, Mark, and in his 20s didn't have a ton of coaching experience.

SAM PRESTI: Well, I'll tell you kind of the foundation of this. I used to go down and watch practice or whatever and have some questions about the players, Bradley Beal or whoever was there, because they had good players.

Then he and another guy on the staff, Oliver Winterbone would ask, hey, yeah, we'll tell you about the players, but then they would like pepper me, worse than this. So we would just talk for a long time about different things. They'd be curious about the NBA, the way we were doing things, why we were doing things a certain way. I'd want to know the players.

They knew the SEC pretty good, so we'd just talk about -- we spent a lot of hours together.

It's funny because one thing about Mark is he's a copious note taker. So he's got all these notes from my conversations with him, and he sent them to me recently, like two years ago. So I'm looking at all this stuff that I was saying, I was like, oh, my God, what an idiot.

So yeah, so he's got all these notes of all these people he's talked to.

But yeah, that's how the relationship really started.

Then obviously we hired Oliver. He was here for a while. He's now gone into player representation -- I shouldn't say that, staff representation. And then after that, I hired Mark, and we did -- he did the G-League.

We spent a lot of time together because when we were in playoff series he was always around, but he was never on the bench, so I'd watch a lot of the game in the back with him, and we'd just talk about different situations or when the G-League season was over, did a lot with the draft

process.

So I think just like -- and he's seen a lot of things within the organization. He's been here for a long time. There's a lot of corporate knowledge that I think aids us. We can get right to certain things like quickly.

Q. Do you think the players will know who he is during the draft process this year?

SAM PRESTI: I think they will know who he is during the draft process. It depends like sometimes he'll do it, sometimes he won't do it. It's a great opportunity for some of the other coaches, so like when we talk about development within the organization, we're talking about that with everybody.

Part of the reason why Mark is Mark is because we put him in situations to run the draft stuff or I took him with me to run a workout for a player that wouldn't come in here, but we ran it somewhere else, so he ran the workout with a couple other guys.

Again, competitive diversity, professional -- competitive diversity, professional diversity, just getting in these different situations.

We want other people to get those types of experiences, too, and a lot of times the summer is big for that. But yeah, he'll be -- I think he'll be well-known at this point, and that he controls the minutes.

Q. I don't know if you know this, but you guys would have went like 78-4 if Aaron Wiggins started every game --

SAM PRESTI: He mentioned that to me in the exit meeting. (Indiscernible) No, he didn't. No he didn't.

Q. What about him is just like -- everyone associates him with having like a winning characteristic.

SAM PRESTI: I just think with him, again, it goes back to -- I was answering the question about player evaluation. It's just how nebulous it is. Difference between evaluating a player and knowing what to do with the player, those are big things.

But the person is a big thing, too, so I don't know how you could sit and rank a bunch of players without knowing anything about them.

So we have a lot of information on all the players because we do our work like every other NBA team does. We just heard really good things about him as a guy, stability-wise,

maturity-wise for his age.

You know, we've been fortunate to kind of -- some of those back-end situations, whether it's Lu or Wiggins, the probabilities in those areas, I'm sure everybody knows, like you're into like below a percent. Like it's low probability.

But we try not to treat the decision like that, though, so we don't treat the decision process based on the probability of success.

He did a good job with us, and the biggest thing I could say about that is he's just very mature and steady. He accomplished what he did in the NBA the same way he did at the G-League, and even coming through Summer League. He was steady, took things as they came, ready when called upon.

I remember I was in the G-League bubble - I think this was right - I was in the G-League bubble and Mark called me because I think Lu may have been injured, and he's like, I'm thinking about starting Wiggins. What do you think? I was like, all right.

I think he was on a two-way. I think it's another example of putting the conscious discomfort and like seeing the benefits of that. Everybody sees, oh, Aaron Wiggins has turned into a -- that's because we had to put him in situations where he wasn't to find out if he could be.

I think that's the beginner's mindset that I referenced earlier. I think for our organization, with our market, with our ethos and our ideals, that's kind of important to us.

We can't really lose that. We need to be a little unorthodox and be willing to do things and take risk where it could go poorly and take the criticism if people feel like that's necessary.

But the worst thing to do would be to not explore those things, and you never uncover the potential of something because you're so scared of what other people might say even if they don't understand you.

Q. Do you plan to play in two summer leagues this year and what was the benefit of doing that this year?

SAM PRESTI: We are. We're going to do both. More reps, different environments, more opportunities. The hard part is you just can't play everybody the whole time because the schedule is pretty grueling.

But our guys played -- they soaked it up last year. We had to take a couple guys off the floor because they were just toast by the end.

I think it's great for us to do that. I'm a fan of doing that.

Q. Going back to the G-League, you saw Andre come back to the floor. In terms of the organization, what was that like for you to watch that unfold?

SAM PRESTI: Oh, it was just amazing. The part about that to me is you want to talk about a guy that -- this is what made him a good player. He's over himself. Like most guys would not do that. But he wants to play. He's a competitor.

I mean, I went and watched him practice some days, and you wouldn't know that he was pretty impactful player in the Western Conference Finals team. You know what I mean? He certainly wasn't the reason we didn't advance those years.

When the lights were bright and it was -- he would find ways to impact the game. He was a great teammate and was a great teammate to those guys, too, at the Blue. So he's one of the all-time teammates I think we've had. In addition to being part of a lot of winning. Perk I think won 75 percent of his games while he was here, with some help, but he flipped a bit of a switch for us and was a pretty important component because we were missing something. It was clear, and we were able to figure that out.

Dre, you know, again, with a lot of help, but played his role exceptionally well. He came up in some pretty big moments. Never backed down. Not a guy that flinches.

Q. To follow up, you mentioned that first 50-win Thunder team and you mentioned Perk, you mentioned Jeff Green as one of the guys, but some of the match-ups against some of the teams like the Grizzlies, the Lakers, the Spurs, lacking some physicality and then you get Perk. Is it too early? Are you looking at other team constructions as kind of --

SAM PRESTI: That's kind of what I'm saying, and the fact that you're asking me the question is like a lifeline that I didn't explain it well, so let me try one more time because I don't think I did a good job with it.

It's so early. I think when we were at that point where we were a 50-win team organically on our own volition and the other teams were kind of composed to a certain degree, we were less known than those teams were, I think, compositionally, because we were still so young. No one knew how good we'd be.

But we were threatening you. We were 18 games over

.500. When we got to 50 wins anyway, 18 games. We went (snapping fingers) -- it was a big improvement. I don't remember what it was, but it was pretty quick.

I don't think you can look and say, oh, well, the west is down or this team -- I mean, because the west was not down, and then Kevin Durant just parachuted into the west. If you're waiting to like -- for the seas to part for you, it will never happen.

I also think that if you become impatient or reckless, you can storm the beach, but it may not be very wise to do that until you really are prepared to take on those types of teams, especially if you're going to expend a lot of assets to do that.

I wouldn't say we're looking at that because the one thing about the NBA, and it's happened more and more, is things are changing very quickly, and that's why I think you have to be adaptable. That's what I said earlier in the opening, I feel like we're well positioned. I feel we're well positioned to be adaptable, if and when we decide to make a decision or move ahead in a way that is unorthodox.

Q. What books are you reading this summer?

SAM PRESTI: Whoa, that's the end. Someone has said uncle. Was that a real question or are you just trying to end the --

Q. Both.

SAM PRESTI: I'll just do the things I've read. I've read a book by Laird Hamilton who's a surfer, which was good. I'm reading a book about Brian Eno, the producer, a book about George Martin, a book about him, that producer. That was good. There's a book called "Spark of Genius" or "Sparks of Genius," I can't remember. Someone recommended it to me. It's pretty good.

I thought it was good. It talks a lot more -- I'm really fascinated by the left brain, right brain, the toggling, and I think that talks a little bit about that.

There's more on the list, I'm just trying to -- coming up a little dry here. Then I'm sure there will be more by the end of the summer. Someone will ask that -- maybe an earlier stage of the next press conference.

Q. What's your good luck charm to overcome the 98.3 percent odds of getting the top pick?

SAM PRESTI: Being at peace with the fact that you know you have no control over it and just not worrying about that.

Anyway, I just want to say one thing before we end. April 28th through the 30th is the Memorial Marathon. Okay, obviously yesterday was the date of the Memorial, 28 years. That weekend is a big weekend for the city because we have thousands and thousands of people coming in to run in that marathon. One, because it's an incredible moment of reflection that is important for our city to always remember. The other is that they have an opportunity to engage with the people here, so it's a great opportunity for people to experience Oklahoma and Oklahomans and the Oklahoma standard.

If you can, I would tell people like get out and try to support people during that race, because I think people walk away from all over the world with a real positive experience. Take your kids or take somebody, go cheer some people on.

I think it's the kind of stuff that as a society, we need to continue to get back to doing and recognize that, A, it's for an important cause and it brings attention to the fact that we've got to always remember, but also, it's an opportunity to demonstrate like what the people here are made of and why it's such a great place.

So I just tell people, hey, get out there, we're going to have thousands and thousands of visitors; let's make sure that they have a great experience and walk away feeling great about their experience here and want to come back.

All right? Thank you, guys, for everything.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports