

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Cason Wallace

Keyontae Johnson

Sam Presti

Press Conference



gratitude to deal with those as well. I feel really confident about that.

Just talking briefly about them as players, Cason is a quintessential two-way player, somebody that we are really excited to have. He plays no-agenda basketball, and that's one of the things that really attracted us to him.

All players have stories, and I think his story is a great one, because in today's world in, basketball, there's so many people saying, you've got to get more shots, you've got to do this, you've got to be more out in front, you've got to draw more attention to yourself. This guy got drafted in the Top-10 by just being an incredible team player, a guy that makes the right play all the time, and I think that's a great lesson for a lot of young players out there.

Keyontae, another two-way player, highly competitive and highly skilled, someone that has gotten better and better and better. I think everybody understands, his story is all about perseverance, resilience and bounceback. You can't put into words what his story means. It crosses and transcends sports. Incredible that he's here today.

And like I said, every player has a story and now we are absorbing those stories as a team and as an organization as we write the next chapter for our team.

So with that, we'd open up with any questions.

Q. If you wouldn't mind just talking about the decision to make the move up in the draft order. I know you can't talk specifically about other players involved and whatnot but moving from 12 to 10, how did that come about, and what was the process for y'all?

SAM PRESTI: You know, our philosophy has always been, try to get as high as you can, and it's really hard to do that. We are always thinking about how to pick as high as you can.

This was I think an opportunity for us that made sense for both teams in a lot of different ways, and Nico Harris and I have been talking about it for, I don't know, I'm going to say probably about a week, it really started to become more of a topic. We touched base on it every day. We didn't know if it would happen or it wouldn't.

THE MODERATOR: In what has become a Thunder tradition, we have invited some community leaders to have their own draft day and be part of this. So this year, we have with us today Dr. Stacy Dykstra, the CEO of the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma; Debby Hampton, president and CEO of United Way of Central Oklahoma; Jorge Hernandez, president and co-founder of Tango Public Relations; Dr. Mautra Staley Jones, president of Oklahoma City Community College and Dr. Valerie Thompson president and CEO of the Greater Urban League of Oklahoma City.

Welcome today and thank you for your leadership in our community.

Now we'll hear some opening comments from Sam, and then we'll have an opportunity for the media to ask questions to Sam and the newest Thunder players. Thanks a lot.

SAM PRESTI: Thanks for joining us, everybody. Just a couple things before we start.

Just want to welcome the Wallace family and the Johnson family to Oklahoma City. These are big days for families, also for the players. When you think back about how players get to this point in their career, this is the starting point of their professional career but the ending of their amateur career. There's a lot of hard bleacher seats in high school gyms, AAU events, car rides, pickups, practices, countless time in backyards or playgrounds or gyms all across the world, and this is a really special day for everybody across the NBA but especially for the two gentlemen that are sitting next to me today.

I think both have tremendous foundations as a result of their families to deal with all the adversities that will take place as professional players, as well as all of the successes they will enjoy. They will have the humility and



But the way things shook out it, worked out great for us. We were able to accomplish our goals, which obviously moving up to get Cason, and they were able to accomplish goals for their team.

It was nothing more than daily communication, check-in, and the way the board goes, that really dictated the ability for them to feel like they can make that deal with us.

Q. This question is for Keyontae and Cason. You guys played each other in the NCAA Tournament. Keyontae, since you were on the winning side, what was it like going against each other, what do you remember from that game and what is it like sitting next to Cason as teammates?

KEYONTAE JOHNSON: Cason, he was one of the main people in the scouting report. We knew the main ability he can bring to the game. He with tried to maintain him, but he still went for 20, you know what I mean (laughter).

But he's definitely a great player, definitely respect his game.

CASON WALLACE: Thank you for that intro, appreciate that, man.

But going into the game, we knew that their whole team, they were going to fight. They had a long journey and they made a big name for themselves like he said, he was one of the main guys on our scouting report as well, and tried to contain him as much as possible. But he still played hard throughout the game and he had his moments, and it feels good to be sitting next to him. I know how tough of a player he is, and I know the amount of, like, hard work he put in to get here.

Q. What's it like just being teammates here together now? Key?

KEYONTAE JOHNSON: It's a blessing. I mean, I know he went through a lot and I went through a lot. Just saying that we never gave up and just fulfilled our dreams and really just put in the work is definitely a blessing.

Q. I know you watched both these guys a lot. Do you remember watching that tournament game specifically or kind of thinking that there's two guys on the floor that you were interested in?

SAM PRESTI: I was there, too, as a matter of fact (laughter).

So yeah, I was at that game. It's funny, I didn't really think about that like that until you asked the question. Yeah, I

was there. It was incredible game obviously. Those two teams competed, if I remember correctly the way that went, it was just a great game from the tip. It was really entertaining. It was a really good game to watch.

And we had followed all these guys for so long, that it wasn't a tipping point, you know, opportunity to watch them. But it was definitely helpful.

Q. Can you talk about the moment you heard your name getting drafted and after everything that you've been through?

KEYONTAE JOHNSON: That moment was definitely special. Just setting and waiting and trying to see what team was going to pick me, and I appreciate OKC and all the staff for trusting me.

I heard it back at my mom's friend's house and all my close friend were there. Just all the people that was supporting me when I was down just came to the party. When I got called, the love, the affection that my family gave and my friends gave was definitely one of a kind.

Q. What did it mean to you to have the Thunder not only select you, but trade up to make sure that they got you on draft night?

CASON WALLACE: It meant a lot to me knowing that they believed in me; that they saw something in me that I might not have seen in myself, and I thank them that I'm a part of this great organization, wonderful city and great fan base.

Q. Is there anybody else's game that you compare yours to or somebody that you looked up to that was in the NBA as you were growing up?

CASON WALLACE: I always looked up to my cousin, Terrel Harris, he played in the NBA for a few years.

I'm just trying to be the best version of me. I'm not comparing myself to anybody. I just want to reach my ceiling and see how far I can go.

Q. You played with Tre Mann. Have you spoken to Tre since being drafted?

KEYONTAE JOHNSON: I spoke to him the day after. He was asleep. So when I woke up the in morning, he text like around 6:00, 7:00. He blew up my phone and started posting a lot of videos on Instagram. I definitely contacted him and talked to him.

Q. In this talk from watching the Oklahoma City Thunder franchise from afar, what has stood out? And

when you talk about excited to be here, what makes you feel that you can be a good fit into this Thunder franchise?

CASON WALLACE: Being on the outside looking in, you can see how much the players enjoy being here. On the court, they are always having fun. They look like they are free. They are out there and they all look like they are together. They are not going at each other on the court. You don't really see them arguing and fussing with each other, and that's what I like to be a part of.

Q. As soon as you got drafted, you said that the vibes kind of clicked with OKC. Could you expand on that and what vibes you felt meeting with OKC and this process?

KEYONTAE JOHNSON: Just like Tre Mann, for example, I was already connected with him, so once I got draft, Tre Mann, Jalen Williams, they both reached out to me and made me feel like I was already at home before I even got here. I could tell the connection the team had, like Cason said, just seeing how much the guys really respect each other.

Q. Not everybody gets to play for their favorite team or gets drafted by their favorite team; you do. What was that moment like?

KEYONTAE JOHNSON: It's a dream come true. Surreal. I used to be a fan when KD, Westbrook, James Harden and all those were here. Growing up, I used to play with them on 2K, and to finally get drafted by them is definitely crazy (laughter) definitely a special moment for sure.

Q. You're from Dallas, and there's been a lot of guys come out of Dallas who have been pretty well in the NBA and are doing pretty well. Does that help you -- you obviously know you can play, but having that experience, going up against guys like that, how does that help you at Kentucky now as far as playing in the NBA?

CASON WALLACE: Helps a lot knowing that Tyrese Maxey, I talked to him a little bit while I was at Kentucky. He went there and he's actually from Dallas, too. Knowing that I have connections that went to Kentucky that went -- that's in the NBA right now that I can reach out to and they will text me back; so I have a good amount of resources that I can talk to and relate with.

Q. There's a long lineage of Kentucky guards in the NBA through Cal (Coach John Calipari) starting with John Wall now up to you as the latest Top-10 pick. What is it about Kentucky that gets you guys prepared

to play in the maybe?

CASON WALLACE: I feel like Kentucky helps us on the court and off the court a lot.

On the court, Cal, he puts us in good situations to display what we are good at. If it's not something that we are not so good at, he tells us to try to stay away from it (laughter) but he still gives us the freedom to display who we are on the court.

Off the court, we have a great medical team, a great team that help us talk to media, so I feel like they set us up with a pretty good platform.

Q. Kind of an open-ended question, I know you're talking to virtually every prospect, but whether it was watching these guys play or kind of meeting with them, learning more about them, any anecdotes or kind of stories you can share as you were kind of talking or watching these guys?

SAM PRESTI: Well, Keyontae, he knew a lot about those early Thunder teams when we were talking. It was pretty apparent to me. And I noticed through this draft process and maybe starting last year, too, a lot of the guys that are coming up now were young kids when we started here. So those teams are like really penetrating for that generation of player.

So it's been really insightful just the impact that the early years of this franchise has had on a lot of different young players today, and then to have them so appreciative of being able to step into that lineage is awesome. It's really overwhelming. So that was Keyontae. We had a great conversations about that.

And then with Cason, I guess the one anecdote there would be I went down to watch some of the Miami/New York series in Miami, and I popped into a gym that he happened to be working out in, and while I was there, it had been -- we were talking on the sidelines, and he said, "My parents are coming. They haven't been around since I started training here in Miami," because that's where his agent had him training.

So they walked in. Toward the end, I was walking out. I sat and talked to them for a while, and then his mom, Kim, said, "Who are you again?"

CASON WALLACE: (Laughing).

SAM PRESTI: I thought, Oh, I didn't even introduce myself, just some random guy that walked up and she hadn't seen her son in like two weeks and is doing this



Draft stuff.

But anyway, she did remember me this time (laughter). So I went right over to her right when she got here.

But yeah, it's funny how this stuff happens and you meet these people and you follow the players, even as you mentioned earlier, being in the same arena when they are playing each other. You don't know how these things turn out, but we're really fortunate to have these guys, and it means a lot that they want to be here.

Q. Cason, you grew up in North Dallas, like two and a half hours away from here. What does it mean to play so close to home to where your family can virtually come to every game if they really wanted to?

CASON WALLACE: It's great. When I came out here, this is one of the spots where I was like, yeah, I really like it a lot. Close to home, not too close, not too far (laughter). So they will be able to come to a lot more games this year. It's a great opportunity for us.

Q. I'm assuming both these guys will be in Summer League. Will they be joined by Chet Holmgren?

SAM PRESTI: As we always say this time of year, these guys will be there. We'll let you know exactly who is going to play and who is not, but it's our hope that they will be out there, our expectation. I can't say everybody else that's going to be on the team.

But Chet's doing great. He's had a great off-season. It's one of those things where you sometimes don't appreciate the consistency of somebody because all through the Draft process and all through, really, since the end of the season, you're in the building every day and he's out there, same time, same schedule, just monotonously putting in all this work with our coaches, and you know, just knowing how badly he wants to play.

He's done a great job and he's followed the plan and he looks really good. We are excited for him, but I don't think anybody can be more excited than he is, and it's a great thing because he's shown a lot of growth but also a lot of discipline going through this entire process.

Q. Have any of the other Thunder players reached out to you? I know Keyontae said a couple guys reached out to him after being drafted. But have you had any contact with any of the players here and what have they told you?

CASON WALLACE: Definitely talked to some of them after I got drafted. They was just welcoming me to the team and

telling me, like if I need anything, I can hit them up. But they seem like real down-to-earth people, real cool people.

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