

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Sam Presti

Press Conference

SAM PRESTI: Just want to thank everybody for coming today. It's always good to be back in the same room with everybody.

This is our 16th year of basketball in Oklahoma City. We're super excited about that. We don't take that for granted.

I was thinking about as I was getting ready to make some of these remarks the image that we sent out last week or something like that about the unveiling of the logo from 15 years ago. I really kind of sat with that for a little bit.

When you think about all that's happened in those 15 years, so many great players that have come, have gone, followed by other great players, all the different experiences that we've had as a team, as an organization, as a community. It's really great thinking about all the different people that have been a part of that.

Then I think, well, how many guys are still in the league from that point in time, and it was like 5 percent of the NBA is still in the NBA from the time that thing dropped off, so it gives you also better perspective on that's a long time and there's a lot of careers that went the entire distance during that period of time.

But I also thought about like what is the through-line for those 15 years, and I think the through-line for those 15 years, that was the same when we showed up in '08 and the logos behind me were not even the Thunder logo, but that like no-frills Corn Flakes logo.

The through-line is trying to put together an elite basketball organization that could support elite basketball teams. That's been the constant throughout the entire time we've been here.

For the next 15 years that's going to be the focus again, and we're super excited about that.

With respect to kind of where we are now, we're three draft classes into the pivot that we made a few years ago. Now, two of those draft classes have played for us. The third



hasn't played a minute, but in a couple months, they'll take the floor and we'll be into three draft classes, and we're excited about the collection of guys that we have both as people and players.

We're looking forward to that and getting those guys acclimated with the current group.

I also spent some time thinking about the season over the summer, and one of the things that I turned to -- I think we always look back on our own histories when we think about things and reflect on things, was a book I was given when I was in college called "Values of the Game," by Bill Bradley. I think most people here know who Bill Bradley is.

It was a really impactful book for me because it really kind of -- again, it's like part of those through-lines that exist in all kinds of sports. I think it's definitely relevant to a lot of the things that everybody loves about basketball and that it really starts kind of at a young level, and a lot of those things that we learn about the game and we take with us early on.

But it also made me realize that I don't have a lot of newer novel thoughts about this particular season as we're approaching it, and part of that to me is like okay, because it's kind of where we are as a team, and part of that monotony or the drudgery of having to kind of start fresh year after year, it's kind of like a touchstone for lasting success.

I don't know that I'm going to have a whole lot of new insight for you. I'll answer all your questions, but there's just a lot about the team that is still undefined, and there's a lot of questions you're going to ask to be honest that I'm going to say, I don't know the answer to that.

I think in today's day and age, it's more constant that people take really hard stands with like a very shallow amount of knowledge and they just say it really loud rather than just say -- and that's taken more seriously than saying, I'm not sure about that; I don't really know how that's going to go; or I don't know how much that person is going to play. I'd rather not be in the business of predictions.

But I think with where we are, it's mostly about observations. And we're good with that.



Just to give you an illustration of that, a year ago at this time, the number one question you guys were asking was is Shai okay. But not for the reasons you're thinking. Because he sprained his MCL, and that was a big deal at this time, but no one is thinking about that right now.

Isaiah Joe wasn't on the team. You wouldn't have to be here right now if you would have wagered that J-Will would get 8, 8, and 8 in a play-in game. You could be on a beach somewhere relaxing and not having to listen to me, for some of you for the 15th or 16th year.

That's why we always remind our scouts and our evaluators that there are two types of forecasters. There's those that don't know, and there's those that don't know that they don't know. That keeps us super humble with respect to predicting things or assuming that we have answers that there's just no way we could have the answers.

So we kind of walk through that pretty open-minded, and you've just got to get used to dealing with a lot of uncertainty. Now, we've been dealing with a lot of uncertainty the last few years. The uncertainty has been different. The questions this year I think will be different than they have in the past.

I even resorted to going to the kids in the backseat analogy. I think, Jenny, you might have asked that question about when are we going to work there, is it ever going to work, are we embarrassing the league. I don't know if those questions are going to come this year. I'm happy to answer them the same way because we've been extremely consistent the entire time and very transparent about it, but I still don't have the answers to that.

A lot of the things we talked about last year at this point in time I do think are applicable. One was we talked a lot about variance, that there was a pretty high or wide bandwidth within what the team was capable of, and the reason why is because we have a really young team. We still have a really young team. We had a very inexperienced team. We still have a pretty inexperienced team.

There's a lot of things that I would call or we call the silent forces of the NBA that generally get in the way of young teams succeeding at a high level.

We hit the higher band. As a team that won less than 30 games, there's like a 7 percent chance that we would end up improving by 16 games. So 93 percent of the time that's not happening. In fact, it usually takes, if you're under 30 games, it usually takes two years to improve by

about 12 and a half games from that point, wherever you start from.

We got very fortunate in a lot of different ways, and that's still with the fact that we finished as an under .500 team. We really struggled to play more than a month of consistent basketball.

We had a lot of regression during the year, but that regression ultimately led to improved play as the season wore on.

I think that's another key part that this particular team we all understand and accept and has been the case for a long time, which is that regressions are not necessarily part of a problem, but they are part of a process that you're going through all the time as a basketball team, especially a young team, because in a lot of ways, the tools that we use to evaluate certain teams, like the teams that are in an elite state right now, those tools don't necessarily apply particularly well to a young team because it's constantly changing.

Then really good basketball, we all know it when we see it, right. I referenced that five-minute stretch against Dallas two or three years ago where we captured it for a small section of the game.

But that's -- basketball is not meant to be played perfectly. Like it's not -- it can't be. It's such a hard game to play because you need five people in total synchronicity, and that takes a lot of work.

Then when you do get it, you lose it within the game. It's very elusive to play at that level all the time.

That's, I think, a big part for us is we're going to need time to build that synchronicity, so those segments of the game where we're really in sync are more common and we can spot them more often.

We talked about play style. I believe personally that play style is really where the upward bound is for this particular team. A lot of the roots of that play style were put in place in the 2021 season, right, when we first started this pivot.

I think looking back, a lot of people would say that we made the most progress last year. I think we saw more signs of that, signs of progress, but I think the most accelerated progress we made was that season in terms of installing a lot of those stylistic things that Mark put in place, and most importantly, those are scalable. Those were scalable things that we could build on each season, and we've done that.

Five or six years ago in the league, the phraseology that was probably the most common was "make a play," "make a play." I think for our team, the upward bound is serve the game. Serve the game. Play the play that's in front of you. What's the most natural play to take place, and what's the play that should happen. That gets the team playing at its capability.

We define capability as a notch above your natural talent level. Like a notch above your natural talent level that you're capable of but you may not be able to hit every single night out until you get enough reps under your belt as a unit, and then that standard starts to grow.

The other thing about play style that's so critical for our team, and I think it's a real credit to Mark and the coaches is the way we play has allowed us to absorb a lot of different talent, so when we started the season last year, our system wasn't fixed.

There were some principles to it, but, J-Dub was not playing the role that he played at the end of the season. Josh Giddey wasn't playing the role that he was playing by the end of the season. We were able to absorb those players without anyone else losing their efficiency.

That's a process that we had to go through, and it didn't just happen overnight. A lot of people are talking about this being Chet's first season, and it is in one sense, but it's really our first season with Chet more than it's Chet's first season.

Our ability to absorb him in a way that allows him to play efficiently while everybody else can be a part of that as well is one of the strengths of the way that we play stylistically and part of the reason why we took this approach, and also with this particular style of player three to four years back.

I'm really excited because it's not going to be something that just rolls out and you try to box up. In fact, I would really be scared if we were latching on to whatever we see early because we'd be cutting off all our possibilities over time.

Mark talks about discovering the team a lot, and to me, again, like the way I see that is discovering the team is watching the same thing that everybody else is watching over and over and over again but thinking about it in different ways.

I think that's how Isaiah Joe finds his way on to the floor. Dub makes a bit of an assent, but not in a way that compromises the play style of anybody else. In fact, the team gets harder to guard.

I use a Spinal Tap example at this time last year, and most of you are not old enough to know what Spinal Tap is, but if someone is turned up to 11, nobody can play well. No one can play well. So finding on the mixing board the right levels for everybody.

Now, that's also going to change over the course of time because the team is changing all the time when you have young players. I just came from -- walked past the gym coming in here, and those players look different than they did a few months ago, and that's going to be the case for two to three to four to five years.

Each step of the way, we have to really stay open to where the signal is, but the framework in which we're putting the players really allows them to flourish and play well as a unit. I'm really excited about that.

The other thing that we talked about a lot in terms of things that get in the way of young teams, because it's not necessarily talent, right, there's a lot of extremely young talented teams but they have a harder time prioritizing all the different distractions and things that come into a team dynamic in today's day and age, and that's why I call these things the silent forces.

Statistics -- I think we've done an exceptional job. Like part of getting the upward bound and getting a 7 percent outcome was because our players did an excellent job prioritizing these things and overcoming them.

Now, the reality is whether you're a young team or an old team, you're still going to have to do that. You're going to have to do that. Statistics, personal ambitions, accolades, off-court opportunities, these things are important. They're not not important, but they have to come in the right order if you want to win at the highest level.

I think we did a pretty good job of that last year, otherwise we wouldn't have reached that higher bandwidth.

Communication, internal communication, especially in a world today where a majority of communication is done through texting or email or technology, that don't work in sports. You can't text someone in the game, pass me the damn ball, I'm open. It helps if you can talk to another person.

When you engage somebody personally in a team dynamic, you are basically telling them they matter to the team. So having that kind of internal communication is hard for younger teams.

I think it's going to get harder because there's not as much personal interaction because of technology. Technology is

incredible, it's great, it's accelerated us so far. It's supposed to be saving us time. That's what technology is supposed to do. But what are we doing with the time. That's a bigger issue for a different day and different business.

We have to have good internal communication with a young team, and I thought our guys did a pretty good job of that last year, as well.

Impatience, that's another aspect. Younger players have failed to see sometimes that the 82-game season is not a day-to-day referendum. What it is is an opportunity to figure out how good you can become by the end of the season.

Even a team that wins 50 games is going to go 2-8 during the season. Majority of 50-win teams have a 2-8 stretch or are going to lose four or five games in a row. When you're younger you might not understand that, and that might seem like a huge issue and you start to lose your footing.

But having good emotional leadership within a team is a big part of navigating an 82-game season. What I feel really optimistic about, and I said this to J-Dub recently when we were talking, the team for a younger group had a pretty nice level of poise and what I would call calm endurance through the year.

It was very unusual, and one of the reasons I was extremely optimistic about what we accomplished last year. I thought the 16-win improvement was great and some, I don't know, some pretty high level like net rating flip, all that. But all these other aspects that are really more tangible that drive performance over time, those are the things we have to hold on to.

I think we had that kind of calm endurance during the year. Even when we were playing down the stretch and we weren't playing our best basketball, we stayed with our identity and who we are and how we operate, and we ended up getting what it is that we were hoping to get, which was some playing experience.

We handled our business in a way that was, I think, wise beyond our years, and that's a credit to the players.

The other thing that's a silent force I think we all know is just all the noise that surrounds teams and sports. Social media is now the fifth major sport in North America. It's a competitive sport. It's a performance sport. Anybody can play it.

Generally speaking, the people that are the loudest and the most controversial make the All-Star team. That's a reality.

That doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with it, but it has to be put in its proper place and not be allowed into a dynamic that really needs unity, right, because social media is a hyper-individualistic endeavor and it has great value, but it also erodes your responsibility to other people because it's so focused on you.

It can be focused on you coming in. I think most everyone here is thinking about hyper individualism meaning focus going out. No, it can really target individuals and compromise the way they think about themselves or their performance or what their incentives should be.

Our players did an excellent job with that last year. I'm really proud of -- again, like the emotional leadership that was shown within the team; it was really special.

But as a team and organization, you have to realize that everyone has a circle that is well-meaning, loves them, and wants them to do extremely well individually. Those people are critical and are a big part of the journey, whether it's family members, agents, sponsors. It could be anybody.

But they're not necessarily thinking about team performance first. So that's a balance that's very hard for young teams to take on.

I thought our guys did a really good job with that.

These are the silent forces that are there all the time. They're not just there for young teams, they're there for older teams. They're there in your lives, they're there in my life, and in reality what it requires is there needs to be like a daily rebellion every day within a team that wants to win to overcome those forces, because the forces don't overwhelm the people or the organization; the people and the organization fail to overwhelm the forces, because you have to go toward them and recognize they're there and take them apart so that you can ultimately get what everybody says they want to get, which is to win and win consistently.

The problem with that is you never graduate from it, but older, more experienced teams that I've been around in San Antonio and here, they compartmentalize that a little bit differently. They've seen that movie before.

I thought our guys were well ahead of the game on that. But we have to start over and build that mentality and that endurance up again.

The other thing that -- and I talked about this with Shai recently, is the rate of learning that we had last year, we

talked about this at the beginning of the year, because we're so young and we're so inexperienced in a lot of ways, our rate of learning has to out-pace that age and inexperience. Things that were taking -- could take two to three months for a lot of teams to absorb and learn from in terms of regression or adversity, our guys were getting in two to three weeks, and that was a big reason why we had a 7 percent -- we hit that 7 percent high-end bandwidth.

Now, if one of these different things wasn't sitting on all cylinders, we could have been on the negative side of that bandwidth very quickly. But we happened to do a good job of that.

The learning happens out of order. It doesn't happen in succession. It's not you finish chapter 1, you get to chapter 2. It's very random when it comes at you. You play well for a little bit and then you play poorly. You don't know why. Why do we suck right now? That could be a lot of different things.

The guys don't learn in sequence. It's not a class.

That's when we talk about the discovery part, because we're never going to fix all these issues. We have to stay open and we have to look at all the different options so we can figure out where the highest bound, where the upper bound is.

I'll give you one example of this. We were sitting there several years ago and we had Chris Paul, Dennis and Shai, and if we were to follow an orthodox methodology, you would say two can be on the court but you can't play three. Who do you think probably gets the short end of the stick? The young guy. The young guy gets the short end of the stick.

But think about where we would be if we compromised that pathway and said, you have to wait, because we don't think we can play three point guards at the same time, because no one else has done that.

Well, you have to throw it out there. Now, it can blow up in your face. Mark changes the lineup at halftime a third of the time. It doesn't work every time.

But the ability to expand your comfort zone to try these things is what gives you opportunity to find different opportunities within the team. I thought we did a good job with that in the past, and we'll have to continue to do that.

I know there's different points in time when people would say, well, why are you doing that; no one else does it. Or they see that as a sign of not trying. But in reality, for people that just see it in simplistic terms, we won 16 more

games. So are we not trying or are we actually trying to find things and do a little bit differently, accepting some risk along the way because it's natural. Some of it is going to blow up in our face and that's fine, because the one or two things we find, like maybe Shai getting a bunch of minutes in that dynamic playing off the ball, honing some scoring skills. We're bearing the fruit of that.

It gives us more confidence to say, hey, here's the ball, we haven't seen you play full-time point guard before but let's give that a go.

We gave him a full maximum contract after he played 100 games, right, and we didn't have a ton of team success with that, but we saw enough because we had explored those outer bounds a little bit.

Just kind of to wrap things up, as I always say, what we're after is sustained high performance over a long period of time. We're going to accept the fluctuations and the randomness that comes with looking at something in a wider spectrum. There's going to be part of that.

The improvements that we made last season, like I said, it usually takes teams two years to -- if you're under 30 wins, to average 12 and a half more wins. We did it in one season, so we're stealing from the future somewhere. We got very fortunate, things went very well for us. There's a lot of reasons why, like randomness and also a lot of our own hard work, but there will be some regression in that.

Like I said before, the regression just shines a light on the things that we need to address and work on, and that's part of the process, not necessarily part of an issue.

But we also know the psyche of the era that we play in and that we compete in. We know people will lose their mind. We know that people will hurry quickly to parse data and put up video clips from the 57th game of the season, taking really strong positions that the future of the franchise is in peril because someone is having a bad eight-game stretch.

I think we saw that at the beginning of the season last year when Josh had a slow start.

But that's part of the regression that is part of the process, and we have to be able to see that.

For us, we can't be emotional or impulsive, because if we do that, all the progress that we've made and all the investment that we've made will get multiplied by zero, and this is not a thing where when you get to the bottom you go to the top of the slide. This is a thing where if you become impatient, irrational or give into those defaults, you can end up either stuck on the mountain or at the very bottom of the

mountain again.

So we have to be really delicate with that, understanding that part of being a fan is being passionate about it. We have to look at it a little bit differently.

I will say we're going to be a better team by the end of the season. I said that last year. I feel confident saying that again.

The team as it gains more experience together, and we've added, I think, more talent to the team, as well, but the synchronicity and the time together and the experience shared, I think we'll become a better team.

Now, will that amount in a symbolic achievement that people generally associate with being better? I can't speak to that. I don't know. I couldn't have told you that last year. I'm not going to make a prediction on what's going to happen. I'm confident we'll be a better team, and I think that's going to happen for a while.

We could look worse in some areas because we're going back and we're not fitting Chet into the team that finished the season last year because the team that finished the season last year, that's over. That season is over. We couldn't do that. There was a lot of adaptation and modifications that took place through the year to even get to that point. We kind of have to start from baseline again and try to learn the team and then try to shepherd it through the season so that we can get the best performance out of the group that it's capable of right now.

Like I said, capability is a notch above like the natural ability.

We're really looking forward to that, but it's going to be a long process after we go through it.

What I'd say to our fans is enjoy the ride. Enjoy the ride. We have a great group of young guys, and they work hard, really hard.

I can't speak to every single guy because I'm not with them all the time, but there's not many times I've walked into this building that Tre Mann hasn't been in this building. Jeremiah Robinson-Earl has been in this building. These guys are wearing this place out.

I always worry about highlighting anyone because we had guys all over the world that are busting their tail, and the reason why is because they really want to do well for the city and the team and themselves.

They've had that level of commitment since they've arrived,

otherwise they wouldn't be here, and if they didn't, they'd kind of probably at this point have gotten flushed out of the system.

I would just say they're going to need encouragement. They're going to need support. They're still one of the youngest teams in the league. There's still a lot of inexperience, and there's going to be a lot coming at them.

One day we want to have a real home-court advantage again, and we understand that we have to earn that. As is the case in professional sports everywhere.

But we're really excited about the opportunity to have a chance to go out and do that again.

But this season is one chapter in what we hope is going to be a pretty long story for the Thunder. In the spirit of the 15 years, if you look at it, since 1976 when the ABA and the NBA merged, there hasn't been a more successful first 15 years of expanded team or relocated team, and that's more than half the league.

There's some pretty damned good organizations in that group.

But it didn't have to go that way. One thing here or there, someone doesn't develop, someone gets hurt, chemistry on a team isn't right. It's like adjusting the steering on a Formula 1 car. One little thing and it can throw the whole thing off because it's so fragile.

So the first 15 years went exceptionally well, but it wasn't written in stone. We weren't entitled to it. A lot of good fortune had to happen.

As I say, you can't step in the same stream twice. We stepped in a good stream. We got lucky. Even the toughest parts of that were pretty good, and I think as time goes on, you can appreciate -- I know we do -- how fortunate we've been in so many ways, especially with the type of players and people that we've had.

You cannot be wise with another man's experience. We had to go through that to learn what it is that we've learned about trying to build the best basketball team in Oklahoma City with a set of values that people here would appreciate and would resonate with them.

The next 15 years, the second mountain is what we're focused on now, with the experience that is our own, that we're not mimicking anyone else, we're not imitating anyone else.

We're applying those first 15 years and trying to see if we



can do better, trying to see if we can do it again where we put ourselves in position, where we're playing extremely meaningful games when it gets warm out, and when you're driving to the game -- most of the games are played in the cold when you're driving, but when it starts to warm up and you have your windows down, that's when we want to be playing.

But it's a long process. It requires a lot of discipline, and there's no promises. That's why we're approaching it the way we have for the first 15 years.

But we're really excited for it.

I appreciate you letting me express my thoughts to the fans, to all the people that really care about this team and this organization, have supported it for a long time, and I just think back to when that logo dropped, and I don't think there was more than one potential artery to where we are today.

We dodged the raindrops to get here, and now we've got to bust our tail to do it again.

Q. You talked about hitting the higher bandwidth of what last year could be and missing some of those silent killers, if you will. Was there a point along the way when you remember thinking you might have a collection of guys in that core that's carried through that maybe this could be a team last year that reached that and maybe there's some signs moving forward about the importance of that?

SAM PRESTI: One of the things that I would say, and this is -- you probably hear me say this a lot -- but I really believe it, I think those signs were there in the first year when we were really scuffling.

To me, a lot of your brick and mortar and the things you reflect on, those things are earned in the valley. Those things are earned in the valley. I'll give you an example.

We were having, by kind of our traditional standards, for the first 15 years we had the best of all -- the teams I mentioned since the merger, we had been accustomed to a pretty high level of play. I'm not saying we were the best in the league, but we were struggling, and we knew we would struggle because we were pivoting the team, we were repositioning, replenishing and ultimately rebuilding the team, and we were taking on a lot of losses.

But there was a quote from Ty Jerome where he basically said, hey, outside we understand the results aren't there, but we're improving. Inside the building, like the spirits are high.

This was 70 games into the year or something like that. I don't know if that's the exact period of time, but once the team and the organization -- once the players and the coaches were really not allowing outcomes to affect the environment, that's pretty rare. I think Mark deserves a lot of credit for that because there's a lot of opportunities to reach for short-term choices, which are really just shallow victories with really no lasting impact.

But they help you feel better in the moment.

I think the guys started to understand that the work would be rewarded and that we have a lot of control over the environment. I think that was important.

I think that kind of attitude has like kind of been pervasive and passed through to a lot of the newer players. Shai and Lu clearly have been here for quite a while, and I think they have a belief in themselves and in the ways of working. They've really aligned with that, and I'm really happy with that.

Q. This is only your second time really -- you built a young team before and built it to an experienced team. How much does the first experience dealing with young players, going through that process, how much does it apply now and how much has it changed because there are some different societal things?

SAM PRESTI: There's a lot of different facets to that question. First, like I said, you have to know the era in which you're competing. I said that earlier. I think that's really important. There's nothing harder than mental time travel, trying to predict -- worse, trying to go back in time and say, oh, we should have just done it the way we're doing it now. That just doesn't work. I've used examples before, well, it's the reason why the Minute Men didn't call on the Air Force. They didn't have that. Would have been handy, but it doesn't work that way. That era was a certain era.

I think it was also just a different time, so everything is different at this juncture. I also think a lot of the things that we were doing at that point in time while you're competing get adopted, and vice versa, and all the other teams, too, people are adopting the strategies or styles or whatever it might be, and that's why I'm a big believer, like you have to cut your own grass.

Like you can't imitate others. Every situation is totally different. You can't be wise with another man's experience or knowledge. We have to go through that.

I do think that does help us because I think what you see is

just the different stages that the team can go through and all the struggles that it can experience, but being a young team now is different than being -- there's a different set of silent forces.

I think a lot of them are the same. One thing -- then there's like a personal side to that. For me, I hope I'm better. I hope I'm better. Like I want to be better tomorrow than I was today. I want to be better next year.

I'm extremely reflective on myself and my own development, and if I'm not that way, I can't expect anybody else to be like that.

I was 30, 31, and following my instincts a lot of the way, and if you have good instincts, you have good experiences, and hopefully if you gather enough experiences, you can turn that into some wisdom.

I do think -- I don't apply that necessarily to me, but organizationally, like I said, if you look at some of the teams from the 76 merger, it's the Heat, the Jazz, the Grizzlies, some really great franchises, and the second 15 years for those franchises were exceptional.

But it didn't happen in the first -- necessarily happen like super quick in the first 15 years.

I have to think there's some type of mileage that you gain as an organization through that that you learn and -- everyone gets kicked around a little bit. I think we've gotten kicked around. Hopefully we've learned from some of those things.

One of the things you hope to learn from is it's real hard to win, and when you do, you need to appreciate it. When you have a great player or great players, really appreciate them.

We've had guys come and they go and then there's somebody else that -- we've just been very gifted that way. I think watching Shai's emergence is an incredible thing, and we're so excited about that. We're not taking that for granted. I don't think we took it for granted in the beginning, either.

But I do think it's different because we're in a different time and place, and the psychology of pro sports, psychology of society is different, and you have to adapt with that, and I think we've done that, along with everybody else. I don't think we were the only people.

Q. You mentioned Shai's emergence. Last year he accomplished a lot as an individual, but this summer he led his team to a bronze medal at the World Cup.

Game after game, he was the man, everybody knew he was the man, and he won, and his team won. Can you talk about can he bring that experience to you guys? Is that important? What is that step?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah. I mean, playing in different -- I think one thing that we believe in is diversity of experience. Playing with different players. One of the reasons why we play a lot of lineups is competitively it's an advantage for us. I think a lot of people think it's simply developmentally geared, but that's not necessarily the case. Competitively it's an advantage for us, not just within the game, but also, players don't get to play with the same four players all the time.

Especially when you get to the postseason or you're playing really meaningful games, you need to have experience playing with different people in different environments. It can't just be like, well, I can play well as well as it's 75 degrees outside, the sun is shining and the wind is slowly blowing in. That's not being a pro athlete.

Let me give you one example of this. Because that's where greatness comes from, right. There's a very famous concert, piano concert by Keith Jarrett, famous jazz piano player, and there's a story, maybe one of his greatest, most seminal concerts was in Cologne. They call it the Cologne concert. He shows up -- first of all, he's playing all over Europe. The concert is supposed to start at 11:30 at night because they were booked after some other thing.

He plays a specific piano and he's like a virtuoso. They order the wrong piano. He doesn't get to fly to Cologne from wherever he's coming from, he has to drive. He shows up late, finds out the piano is wrong.

Like most artists and maybe some players, they can sometimes have a lot of expectations on these types of things. Not that we've ever had anyone like that, but you've got to learn to manage the talent because they are the talent, and you've got to work with the world as it is and not as you would like it to be.

He goes to eat before the concert because he knows he's going to have to play, and they mix up the order at the restaurant. So when he gets to eat, it's late, he gets to eat like three bites of food.

He shows up, bad piano, kind of messed up and busted, and plays the concert of his life because there was imperfections. He couldn't play it the way he normally played it. The situation called -- the situation changed. It forced him -- there's a difference between stepping out of your comfort zone and expanding your comfort zone. We like to say stepping out.

Okay, yeah, anyone can step into the cold pool for five minutes, but can you be there for 15 every day? That's expanding your comfort zone, when you tolerate discomfort or uncertainty, like I talked about at the beginning.

You have to be able to deal with uncertainty. He played the concert of his life. If he got the same exact setup, he would never have achieved that.

Shai playing in these different situations, take any of our players, asking them to play different positions, playing in different situations, changing the lineup at halftime, to me that's discovery. That's where you want to be, because if you have high aspirations, you shouldn't be mimicking what does this team do. There's no independence in that. I think Shai is doing that.

I'd also say his off-season regimen is intense. He's in the lab.

I mentioned to somebody, he's from Hamilton, as we know. There's two professors that have come from Hamilton. One is Shai because he's in the lab, and the other is the drummer from rush called Neil Peart. They call him The Professor. There's two professors. Shai doesn't realize there was another one probably, but he's in the lab.

When he's in the lab he's not doing the same thing over and over again. There has to be change in what he's doing.

I think playing in those games is huge, and he's going to come back a better player, but the team is going to have to figure out how to play with that, and vice versa.

Everyone is changing and growing. That's why they say a gardener never has a day off, because something is always growing. Something always needs to be clipped. You come in, oh, this is bigger, but you can still make a great garden.

But if you're like, no, everything has to stay the same and you have no room for growth on anything, you're shutting off the opportunity to have more than what you see at present.

Q. You guys are going to be pretty much in every single conversation regarding every star in the league who wants to be traded. Considering how good you guys were --

SAM PRESTI: We will be in the conversation or people will put us in the conversation?

Q. Yeah.

SAM PRESTI: I just want to make that clear.

Q. Considering how good you guys were last year and the growth you guys have had, is it sometimes tough not to get a little antsy and just throw all your chips in or is it more so you know who you are and who you want to be?

SAM PRESTI: A couple things on this. Obviously I knew this was going to be coming.

I have thought about this question and a way to kind of put it into terms that isn't dismissive because there's no script here. I don't want to give you the sense -- we practice what we preach. We are open minded, clearly. But there's a couple reasons why I think that particular topic is maybe not relevant right now.

One, I used the example with the paint last year. You can't buy the paint for your house that you haven't bought yet, that you haven't actually bought. You don't know where the house is. You don't know where it's situated. You don't know what style it is. You don't know how much paint you'll need.

We don't really know what we have right now, so to even say -- this is very broad, but a star. Where? Who's to say we don't have a player that could be really good in that spot already? We don't know the answer to that. I don't know.

We may not. But chances are -- it's really hard to find those players. We have one of them. If there happens to be one or two or more on the roster, then we're like, we've really gotten fortunate. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is, again, I'm not trying to dismiss everyone's excitement, but we're not a .500 team. Like I said earlier, we have to finish our breakfast before we start acting like we're on the cusp of something.

I think this is, again, part of the headwinds that you face as a young team. I wouldn't want to "cash in" to become average or above average. I don't think that's really what anyone is expecting. When people say go all in, I don't think they're saying go all in to have one season that's slightly better than your last season.

I think when the team is performing at an extremely high level, you then know, wait, something could help us, and you have better information, we can be accurate. We're big on accuracy.

Then the other thing I say, and I think this is really important, is we can't let the fact that we have some additional draft capital make us soft. You don't want to lose your industriousness. We can't cut corners here. It doesn't matter if we do this or we do that because we have these tools that are just going to solve everything.

I don't know how many times people have gone -- I'm not sure exactly the nomenclature of all-in or cash your chips in. I don't know what that means. When I think about that, I think about a gambling scenario, which again, doesn't jive with sustainable success. It jives with like gambling, live-or-die, lose the house, go home and explain it to your significant other.

I don't want us to rely on that like it's some type of panacea, because one, I don't know how often it's actually worked that someone has done that; and then two, we might need those tools to have a functional payroll over time if our players turn out to be as good as some people are projecting.

Now, I can't protect that. I don't know. But those tools are relatively important to some of the more high-performing teams in the league right now that have big payrolls.

I understand it's a bit of a -- again, these types of questions -- there's a performative -- to do that would be almost performative. I don't think you can make a rational case for it now.

But perhaps at some point when we have a little more information, the team has demonstrated its capability and played in high-performing games and we see what our limitations are, potentially, but I don't know that there's a lot of good rational thinking behind that other than impulse and following content creation that is just part of the world that we live in.

Q. Is there a plan for Chet to restrict minutes or games played, or is it just let him go and see what happens?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think the big thing with that is we have to kind of -- you don't want to predetermine anything. In my opinion, I don't think it's good to predetermine. We have to see how he responds, and then we can play from there.

I would say that just about every player, he's obviously a little more unique because he's coming off a year of an injury, and he hasn't played in this type of -- this level game ever, let alone coming off something like that. He's hit all the marks so far, but we'll have to be just very observant and we'll have to -- we're going to have to improvise a little bit on that.

But as we know -- obviously someone asked me about the resting policy or the player availability policy. Not many people play 82 games. But we'll have to see how that goes.

I think that's relatively applicable to like just how we approach his season with us, which is let's see where we are. Let's learn about this or that. Let's not make a predictive, this is the way it's going to be. I think we shut ourselves off from learning so many different things about him, and he's such a unique player. So we'll have to be very observant.

Obviously we'll be careful, but one thing about him is like he's going to go hard when he's playing. He's a competitive -- his mindset is as unique as his game.

Q. What do you think about the new resting policy?

SAM PRESTI: Player availability policy.

Here are my thoughts on that. I think, number one, I applaud the NBA for being very transparent about the fact that this is a business issue. We have a business issue. They haven't hidden that. We obviously have TV deals that are in the future, and we have an issue where as a league at times our best players are not playing in some high-profile games.

I think it shows -- it's more of a statement by the players, the league and the teams that we acknowledge that this is an issue. This is an issue.

It's in the spirit of competing, people have -- it's gone a little further than I think it was initially intended to go, and it's having an effect that isn't good for our game or our business, and I like the statement that everyone is agreeing with that, and I think it's important that the fans recognize that, that we're acknowledging that issue.

I do think one of the issues we also need to be mindful of is I don't think this is an injury prevention strategy alone. I think that -- we like to say that people are resting because they're trying to prevent injury. Sports science doesn't necessarily support this. I don't think we have enough information. I think just trying to discredit sports science or physical therapy, I don't know that that's the answer, either, because we also don't have enough information to say that if you played more, you wouldn't get hurt.

I think injury is a very random thing. I think a lot of the resting is more based on trying to increase performance of the team later in the season because the schedule is different for every team, and depending on the level of your

team, some teams are managing their roster like a pitching staff gets managed through the 162 games.

The correlation between teams that rest players and play deep in the Playoffs I would imagine is a lot stronger than teams that rest and experience injuries.

I think the performance aspect is something we still have -- now, that's part of the reason that you're seeing this with high-profile teams. So it's a convoluted situation. But I think it's really important that the league and the teams and the players have all acknowledged it's an 82-game league, we've got to do our best to do it every night, especially in the highest profile situations, because it's good for the game, it's good for the industry, and we can maybe curb that a little bit.

Q. Obviously new arena talks are a big deal right now. The organization and the city seem to be sort of aligned on that. What do you see as the need for a new arena and kind of the importance of this upcoming vote, keeping the team here long-term?

SAM PRESTI: Again, like one thing that I'm -- first of all, I'm biased. I can't hide that. So I don't even know that my opinion is like that valid in this case.

I would say this: It's like a political component -- it's a political issue. I'm not a politician. I don't want to say anything that could be misinterpreted because I'm out of my depth on that kind of stuff, and I'm happy to admit it.

Warren Buffett says we have a circle of competence. This is very far outside my circle of competence.

Other than to say that I think the history of the city and the team working together is a very unique one, and I do really applaud Mayor Holt's vision, because I think his vision is not necessarily a vision of the Thunder, it's a vision for Oklahoma City, and I think like the way he's expressed that in a very proactive way, I think he's done a good job of articulating that.

But I'm also a huge believer that everyone's voice matters, and the people will vote on this, and that's the way it should be, and there should be discourse because I think that's healthy.

We live in a world where if somebody has a different opinion than you, you tend to just assume that you disagree with them on everything and that they're wrong. In reality, the discourse is what makes things healthy, but ultimately it will be decided by the community, and I think they've done that for years here. It's how they've built the city, and they'll do it again.

Obviously we'll see where that lands us.

Q. You mentioned the intensity of Shai's off-season regimen. I was just wondering if there are any moments or anything that you observed that you can share with us about his off-season work that stands out to you or maybe some of the other guys that you've observed over the course of the summer.

SAM PRESTI: I mean, everybody has put their time in. I said this a long time ago, but a few drafts ago, the guys are going to have to compete because there's only 18 spots now. At the time there was 17, but there is 18 with the third two-way, and I think there's a lot of people that want to be a part of that team that gets to a postseason in Oklahoma City. And is a part of scaling the -- getting to a point where we're really making progress on the second mountain that we've set our sights on.

I can't put -- we don't have enough time to talk about the amount of work that's gone into the off-season. We've had coaches all over the world visiting players, and the guys, I think, have worked hard, and they're one of the reasons why we want them with us is if they didn't work hard, they wouldn't do particularly well here.

The one thing I'll say on that is really good players know how to activate themselves, and anyone that's really good at anything knows how to activate themselves because it's no secret, the people that are elite at what they do are also the ones that do the most monotonous parts of their craft with excellence.

I read a story yesterday on the passing of Brooks Robinson, one of the greatest baseball players ever, 16 gold gloves, 18 All-Star Games. 18 All-Star Games. And a great human being from what people say.

In the story it said, Earl Weaver, the manager said, we all used to watch. Brooks would get there and he'd be the first one on the field. He was also the last one to the park from what they said, but he'd be the first one on the field taking ground balls, and everyone would be like, why is Brooks Robinson taking ground balls. The guy is a 16 gold glove winner.

Because he's a 16-time gold glove winner is why he's taking the ground balls. Those are the things that I think -- that goes back to the Values of the Game book I was referring to. There's just certain timeless aspects.

To tie that into your question, the different eras, there's through lines in basketball, in sports in general. The guys that are the best are generally the ones that are willing to

accept the drudgery of lasting success, and they're putting in time on fundamental things that they could easily bypass.

One of the things that makes our offense functional, got to be able to catch the ball. Can't make a quick decision with the ball if you can't catch it. Then you've got to figure out how to get in position to catch the ball.

Now, these seem like things that are very basic, but try doing that with Marcus Smart guarding you on the second night of a back to back.

I just think these are the small things that make greatness, and you have to have the discipline to painstakingly commit yourself to keeping your blades sharpened on that stuff. And I think our guys understand that we can't skip it. We can't skip ahead. We have to do those things.

Q. As you guys talked with Vasilije Micic this summer, why was now the right time to bring him aboard, and if you could speak on his game in general.

SAM PRESTI: This is one thing about personnel decisions in the NBA. You don't get to choose when things happen. In another point in time, in a hypothetical situation, oh, we'd really like to have this type of player to complement the team. Like we don't just get to go pick that player off the other team. Because if we really want them, the other team really wants them too and they have value. Just because you have a specific want at a given time and you might know there's a player that fits, the other people have to participate.

In his case, he had a contract overseas. He had goals, I think, personal goals and team goals to try to achieve overseas. We always had pretty good communication, and there was one year where there was no out in the contract.

I just think it kind of lined up and made sense.

But there's just all these different factors. Like I always say, everything is kind of always moving. Nothing stands still. To get a trade done or a signing done, so many things have to fall into place, and in this case, a lot of things kind of just fell into place and it made sense.

As far as his game goes, I think everybody knows the NBA is very, very favorable to skill players that know how to play, that are really good with the ball and can anticipate how to serve the game.

He has a lot of that.

Now, how will that translate? I can't give you that answer.

I certainly know that we're not going to see him play in the first 10, 20 games and go, we have our answer. It's going to be something that he has to learn, we have to learn him. There's no fixed mindset on what exactly he can do or can't do.

It's also relative to who he's on the floor with, too.

You can have elite skills in some area, but you're never going to have complementary skills to your elite skills. That comes from other people.

Team are really good when they're very complementary. It's not just like an assembly of talent. At some level it has to find its sea level together, and we'll see if he has some good combinations with us.

Q. I'm curious, you mentioned a couple of times Values of the Game that you read back in college. What were some things that resonated with you back then and that you still apply today and you still carry with you?

SAM PRESTI: A lot of the stuff we're talking about. I was talking to a group of people recently, and it was like -- the topic was like a leadership thing, and I was like, start with your childhood because the leader you are, the person you are, it's all about how you grew up those first 10 to 12 years. You get pretty hardwired, and not just the best experiences but even the toughest of circumstances.

I think in the way that book starts it's very, very poignant with that. You've got to read the first paragraph. It speaks to just the purity of the game.

Those things don't really leave, I don't think. I'll give you two quick personal stories. What they do in soccer, they do added time. Added time.

I have two personal stories that I think are good for this. One, when I think about like the purity of the game, one of the greatest childhood memories of sports and why I think it's so great that we have a team in Oklahoma City, because these types of things can come to life for young people, is like when Ray Bourque gave his jersey to Phil Esposito. He wore 7; Ray Bourque was the captain of the Bruins, and Esposito was having his number retired, and he wore 7.

During the ceremony, Ray Bourque skates over, takes off his 7 jersey, and he has 77 -- changed his number for the guy.

To me, that's a big part -- that resonates to the values of the game. Respecting tradition, understanding your place

in things, a selflessness. That's the best of sports to me, him doing that. This is the captain of the Bruins. He could have waited, but he gave up something that was special to him because he knew that he was really holding the number for this other guy.

I think that was pretty remarkable, and it was happening when it was being retired. It's fine if he's wearing it. They handed it out; that's fine.

The other one is a personal story about never underestimating anybody. I had to learn that the hard way. I was a good Division III player. I was a good high school player, which doesn't really carry a lot of weight in this building. But I played at this one court all the time, and I knew the rims pretty good. I was pretty good in this one court.

So one day I was training, I was working out, and there was an older guy, like 30 something. At the time I was like 18, not even, probably 17. He says, do you want to play? I was thinking to myself, all right, I'll give it to this guy. He looks like he has a real job. He's not working as hard as I am.

So I remember, like we checked the ball, okay, and he put his shoulder into my chest so hard, to this day I can feel it. He took me apart in a way that I had never experienced. He humiliated me with no audience, and that's hard to do.

Then after the game was over -- halfway through the game I started thinking to myself, I've got to try to ask this guy for some pointers. I was hoping the game would end. He stuck around afterward, and he was like, really coached me. He turned out to be the all-time leading scorer at Holy Cross, and I didn't know. He had no jersey on. He was just playing some hoops after work and just took time to rub my face in the ground.

To show you like life is full circle, I found his number recently. This is after reading a book. I called him. He's like, no idea why I was calling him.

I was like, do you remember this place called the Lexington Club? He's like, yeah. I go, do you remember we played one-on-one, one day, like 30 years ago? Don't really remember that? I do.

So I told him the story, and I was like, I'm really grateful. You could have just walked off the gym and left me there in tears, but you stayed with me and talked to me after and showed me, when your foot is there, you're making it real easy for me. Like he was coaching me.

He got the greatest kick out of it. His name is Jim

McCaffery.

The best start of the story is, you know what, I had the same experience. He goes, it was at a gym in Vermont, and Stan Van Gundy kicked my ass like that and did the same thing. That's the values of the game. That's that kind of stuff. Those things don't change.

That was probably a huge life lesson for me because that taught me never, ever, ever underestimate anybody. Never underestimate anybody.

I think that's why Brooks Robinson takes the grounders, know what I'm saying, are those types of things. You can't leave anything to chance on those things, and you don't know -- there's greatness in all types of people that they may not present that way on what we're taught to think of what it's supposed to look like or how it's supposed to be done or doing something differently than somebody else, but that's where the idiosyncrasies are that make people who they are.

The idiosyncrasy with Jim was he stayed after and helped me out and taught me those certain things, and maybe it's because Stan did something to him.

Q. Sam is there anything with Poku you could add to his story about his injury and the setback it means for him?

SAM PRESTI: Well, it's an ankle sprain, so it's not quite what we were dealing with last year. I talked at the beginning how little we knew at the start of last year. I throw that in there. Poku was playing exceptionally well at that time when he got injured, especially defensively. If we started the beginning of the year, I don't think anyone would have predicted that losing Poku would have been seen as such a big hit to the team.

But he'll battle back from it. It's an ankle. I don't know how long it will be specifically, but he has experience now as an NBA player. He knows how to take care of himself. He knows what his body needs.

On the player availability policy, there's one other thing you just made me think of. Appealing to the players by discrediting sports science or telling them that there's some analytical reason they should play I think is different than appealing to them -- I'm tying all these questions together, but appealing to them on the question of the values of the game.

Just the competitiveness and if you can go, we need you out there. But trying to convince somebody by telling them that the people talking to them are wrong versus appealing

to their heart and saying, hey, if you can. But I don't think you can tell people if they're hurting or not hurting.

I think you can say, hey, we need you out there for the good of the game and the good of the business all these people have come before us.

I think that could have a huge influence on it more so than going to war with medical professionals.

Q. You guys gave Mark an extension this summer. I'm not asking about the details of that contract, but could you just talk about the confidence level you guys have in him that he can lead you back to where you guys want to be?

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, we've said this from the start.

I think he's a great fit for the team and organization. The thing he does so well is he takes the vision of the organization and he brings it to the floor every single day. He really believes in our ways of working. He's a big believer in having a discovery mindset, a beginner's mindset. He's willing to try new things.

I think he takes a pretty optimistic view on people in general, which I think -- it's really hard to grow and develop in a very pessimistic environment, negative environment. I think he does that, but he balances that well with a certain level of accountability to certain principles that are critical to success.

They're just ours. They're not necessarily everybody's principles, but they're certainly things that would be important here, and he stands on those.

But he interacts well with the entire building, and I think that's a big -- like a big thing for us because like the discourse and the communication and the challenging of ideas and the ability to disagree on different things and not take it personal throughout the building I think is a huge aspect of some of the progress we've made.

But again, that didn't just start last year. Like that was him through the process of the Blue head coach and now when he started a few years ago.

He's going to be challenged just like we all will, but I think he's got the tools to keep improving and adapting to new environments.

I enjoy working with him. I enjoy working with him. His heart is in the right spot. He cares about the organization. He really cares about the players, and he's competitive. He's super competitive.

It's a fun combination to come in and try to problem solve with. Him but also the other people we have in the organization are very like-minded, and I feel super lucky to be able to work with people like that.

Q. I know Victor Oladipo is still going through his injury rehab. Is he going to report for camp, and what's the plan with him?

SAM PRESTI: The answer to that is he won't be at camp, so we'll have to make a decision on that contract. VO is great. He's been through a lot. He'll be back this season at some point, and I'm sure he'll be playing with like a really good team at some point, but just with our roster situation, we just can't prioritize that right now.

We're huge fans of his. He's got a great spirit, man, and no one can battle through the things that he's battled through unless you have that kind of spirit and optimism in addition to being an extremely talented guy. He'll be back, and I think he'll be helping someone. Just the alignment for us doesn't make sense right now.

Q. What about the in-season tournament? How do you feel like that's going to affect the flow of the season for your team, for your guys?

SAM PRESTI: You know, I don't know because we've never done it before. I'm on record saying I think it's a great idea. Again, it's a potential revenue generation tool, which for a team like us, we're certainly open to that. That helps us as a smaller market.

We'll see how it goes.

I think the most important thing about the in-season tournament is not to judge it in its first year. There will be people that don't like it, are offended by it, think it's horrible, and there will be people that love it.

I think the key with this is can we get a 12 year old somewhere in the world hooked on the in-season tournament and say, this is awesome, I grew up with it. Sometimes the things that we don't like or we fear are just things that are unfamiliar to us.

Again, I give a lot of credit to Adam. Try this, see how it goes, be willing to take a longer view on it, and maybe this becomes something that becomes a little more of a tradition for a younger fan than it might seem like for us right now.

But I think we're robbing future generations of fans if we don't give it a try, see if it does stick, if it's popular in other

leagues. We can certainly always be learning.

We'll put our best foot forward in that, and I'd expect everyone to do that.

It might compromise the schedule a little bit on the backside because these games can't be back to back. I do think it highlights that everybody -- what we know is that the schedule really does affect performance. I mean, just it's a reality. There's no way you can solve it. It's just like you can't solve geography. Teams in LA or Miami or wherever, that's going to be that way. You can't solve that. Like they're going to have certain advantages. You can't ask the league to fix that. That's unrealistic. You have to adapt.

But I think it will be -- as long as we take a long view on it and we don't get too sensitive to whatever criticism might come or if it doesn't go exactly the way we want, we have to live through that, and it maybe will become normal and normalized for younger people.

Q. I remember you kind of studied the past champion. What do you think can be learned from the Denver Nuggets last year?

SAM PRESTI: We always do this. I was asked about the Hawks one year because they went to the Eastern Conference Finals -- that's the beauty of the NBA. There's always this churn of -- and if we have true parity, which we might -- people always think about parity in one way. They think about it as the upside of parity. Oh, anyone can win. Well, if anyone can win, it also means you can lose and be on the bottom very quickly as fast as you can be on the top. Parity is a thin line there.

Denver specifically, I have a lot of respect for them. It took four years for I think a Jokic team to make it to the postseason. They've traditionally had the same coach. The team around Murray and Jokic has changed a little bit, but a lot of the same guys.

They've responded to a lot of adversities. To me, when I think about that from my seat, to me, you can see a lot of those things. Those are easy to see.

The thing that I think is a little harder to see is what I see there is a result of commitment, a commitment from -- Murray and Jokic are committed to winning with the Nuggets. The organization is committed to those guys. They have just kept at it.

In our society and especially in sports culture today, we're blitzed every day with the terms windows and timelines. Generally the only time we get blitzed with those things is

when one of those entities, their commitment is not quite as strong as maybe it once was. That's when we start talking about windows and time lines.

The commitment from those guys to the team and from the team to those guys in terms of their compensation and relationships, they're all in on winning together, and therefore I think it's allowed the team to really just focus on improving, battling back from adversities, integrating new players, and those guys really being invested in that, knowing that part of the run for them has been there's been some changes.

But I have to think that the commitment to -- the mutual commitment to we're solving this as a group, that to me is really special, and it's rare. It doesn't happen all the time.

That's not to speak ill of anybody else. I just think that they've prolonged that commitment through a lot of adversity where sometimes that can start to fade in today's world.

I don't want to speak for them, but I'm sure they know that it gets harder, but I think they've just always been -- like that group has been together, and they've been all in on how do we work on it. There's never been a weaponization of anything there.

Q. Do you think the potential revenue for a new arena could be a financial benefit for ownership to help keep this core together?

SAM PRESTI: I mean, it's similar to what Jenny said with respect to the in-season tournament. Yeah, I mean, for our team -- I don't mean to do like the Kevin Bacon six degrees of separation here, but with Brett's question about the first era, second era, we know a lot more about our market.

I think everybody in the organization, that's a part of the organization probably has a better view on things in terms of what the market can do, how the revenues can help us, taking a long view on investing in the team like that. I think that's healthy.

Hopefully we have players that warrant that type of commitment. I don't want to get ahead of ourselves with that, but that is one of the reasons why we have to be relatively disciplined or have been relatively disciplined in the last off-season, is because we don't know who we're going to have to pay.

I'm glad we did that last year and we had a hard enough time the first go-around. I don't know that we'll ever have a team with that kind of firepower.

There is a huge legion of pressure for us to sign Ben Gordon or David Lee to a max, and we had a hard enough time as it was. That wasn't just financial. That's a great illustration of those forces, though.

But yeah, I think knowing that that potential revenue could be coming -- you also have potential expansion, new TV contract potentially, in-season tournament. For a team like us, how we're positioned, those things are very positive for our ability to retain our best players.

With respect to the new CBA, now I can talk about it because before I don't think it had been ratified when I was up here. As far as the things that were challenging for us in the last CBA, those things haven't gotten worse. There's nothing -- the repeater tax is still there. But the limitations that are -- that have been inserted are not -- they're not necessarily like totally applicable to a team in our position with what our -- even with a new arena, even with some of these things from a pay roll standpoint.

I don't see any limitation come from a new agreement. Maybe some tough choices on draft choices or something like that in the future, but how often are you going to have -- if you have a really good team do you have a chance to keep it together financially, and certainly knowing that revenue would be coming would be super important for us.

Q. JJ Redick talked about Jalen Williams potentially be an All-Star this upcoming season. I know that's pretty much based on his potential on the court, but he's extremely mature for a second-year player. You just mentioned it. How much do you think that kind of plays into him potentially having a monumental season?

SAM PRESTI: Well, again, you don't get to start where you ended. It took Dub -- partly because he got injured. He had the eye thing. But it took him I don't know how many games, but let's just call it 50 games before he really had his feet underneath him and was playing at a certain level. It took 50 games to get even to that.

You don't get to hold that and start from that point.

I think we saw that with Josh last year. He had a really good first year. The start of the second year went about what you would expect. You still are -- you've only played that way for 30 games, so it would be unrealistic to think you're just going to clock in at -- older players have more experience. That's what experience does for you.

I just think we have to let him follow his own trajectory and not overreact to any type of regressions. He's going to be just fine. Like he's going to be a really good player. He

plays both sides of the ball.

The part I like about him the most is the guy brings the juice. He competes. Like that's the platform for him to really amplify his talent going forward, and he seems to have that naturally.

But we've got to give him and -- we've had a lot of young players here, and I think one of the things we try to do is give them some grace as they find their footing. As they learn how to kind of activate themselves in different situations.

Q. On paper, the Thunder bench looks to be good, looks to be deep. Could be one of the better benches ever in Oklahoma City. What's your comfort level with the bench?

SAM PRESTI: Well, I know Derek Fisher and Caron Butler are on that bench. Those guys are pretty good players.

I mean, I think that there's a lot of options, a lot of diversity to the skill sets.

Certainly like Bertans and Isaiah, those guys -- you can ask people to write out the best shooters in the league, I think they'd make it on most lists. So I think we've gotten better there from where we were a year ago, in addition to just the natural development of some other guys. And Vasa can really stroke it, too.

We still are going to have to be physical. I think that's going to be a main thing. Young teams are talented but they're usually not that physical.

I think that especially like Josh has got to get to the free-throw line. I think we've paid our dues on that. People tee off on him, on his drives. He's 6'9" so there's a lot of room to really get into him.

We have to -- that has to start to go our way now, I think, at this point. So his physicality on the drives are key, and the physicality of the team is important.

We're getting Kenrich back. I think sometimes kind of what's forgotten in where we are as a team or where we ended last season was we didn't have K-Rich for a lot of that stretch, so we're absorbing Chet, we're absorbing Kenrich into the team that finished the season, and we've got a kind of blank canvas to see how that goes.

I think a lot of people talk about the -- like are there going to be enough minutes and all that stuff, but we've got four guys playing 30 minutes last year and still got -- we still tried a lot of different lineups and found a lot of different

things. It wasn't like we were -- Shai wasn't sacrificing playing 20 minutes a game or something like that.

But it's 82 games and there's a lot of different opportunity. We also have the Blue, which we've really, really used quite a bit, and I would imagine we'll use it again.

But in terms of the performance part of it or like how are guys going to have enough minutes, I'll use one example here also is I went to see -- I had never seen Hamilton. I went to see Hamilton at the civic center downtown I think toward the end of the run because it was -- after the draft, sometime after the draft.

So I didn't really know what to expect. But like the lights go out, and all of a sudden the star of the show starts taking -- I didn't even know the whole thing was like rapped. I had no idea when I was watching. I knew it was a cultural phenomenon, for good reason.

I was immediately just like floored at the juice and the energy and the passion -- this guy was giving -- he was giving the performance of his life was the way I felt.

It made me realize, that's the activation question. The ability to perform what you're capable of, not necessarily what your natural talent is. I think that's to me the -- he was reaching that. I thought it was incredible. It made me realize like performance is key, like how do you get yourself to perform.

Then I found out later on that he was the understudy. He didn't get a lot of reps. He didn't get a lot of minutes. But within that moment, with pressure and expectation, and a lot of other people relying on him, he was captivating.

Not everybody can be the -- is going to get to take the stage every night. When you do, as a role player or a bench player or whatever, it's good to have some of that expectation and pressure -- it's hard to play that way. But that's okay.

We said earlier, there was a lot of questions when we started to retool the team about are the guys going to get beat down, are they going to -- I said, we can't bubble wrap everybody. You can't put people in bubble wrap. We also can't -- we have to be encouraging, but we have to have expectations that if we're putting you in the game, we believe you can play. You have to perform. You have to bring it.

That's good pressure to have on a young player in my opinion, and it doesn't have to go perfect every night.

But then later in the year, later in the summer, I was in

Portland for something -- I'm totally dating myself, but I saw Living Color was playing, and those of you old enough to know who Living Color is, and I always -- I used to love Vernon Reid, the guitar player. He was a total innovator, just incredible virtuoso.

I was like, I want to go see Will Calhoun, Corey Glover, Vernon Reed, and Doug Wimbish play. When I was younger and playing music, these guys were the deal.

This was a small club in Portland, and Vernon Reed is now 67, and he played that club like it was Wembley Stadium opening for the Rolling Stones.

To see that technique and that performance, irrespective of the audience, to me that's the Brooks Robinson ground ball example. That's performance.

Like that's what great athletes are after, and that's what our job is as an organization is to walk with those guys, bench player, two-way player, star player, to explore their potential. You draft people, you help develop professionals, and you explore their potential together. You draft people, you help develop professionals, and you explore the potential together.

To be honest with you, I think for our organization, that's the thing that gets us up every day. It doesn't matter who. Those bench guys are going to have their opportunities, and we're going to walk with them to try to figure out how to help them perform at their best.

Q. You've talked a lot about mountains, like the first mountain with the Corn Flakes logo, and then the new era, I see a lot of discussion about questioning a rebrand. Is there anything interesting on you guys' side?

SAM PRESTI: You know, that's a -- I would never say no to that. I do think that when you start a franchise from nothing, it is important -- I think if you start chasing your tail on some of that, and we have to give ourselves a chance for the identity of the team to become kind of entrenched a little bit, certainly I think there's a time for re-looking at that kind of thing, and if we do, I think we'll do a very expert job but also a very thoughtful job.

But also making sure we stay true to who we are.

But I used to say this all the time in our earlier days, like the cement is not dry. We're really only 15 years, going into 16 years. I think 80 percent of the history of the NBA has been played without the Thunder, okay, so we're still the new people on the block here.

Letting that sink in a little bit I do think is important. I understand there's some people that love our logo, don't love our logo. That's okay. If you have an opinion, we're happy about that. You care. That logo means a lot to a lot of different people.

But change is part of progress, too, so at some point I'm sure we'll look at that. But we've also -- I think we've also evolved, as well, and this will be just another way we do that at some point.

Q. You were talking about Corey Glover and Hamilton. In the last 15 years, have you seen anything, watched a performance, done anything and not equated it in some way to what you do every day?

SAM PRESTI: If I couldn't do that, I don't think I'd still be doing this, truthfully.

To me, it's not as interesting to pull in information from your competitors or from even your own industry. Like I'd rather have us have a real independent -- not to say that we're ignoring that, but I think there's so much to be learned from successful things outside of sports. I also think that if you really think about sports, specifically basketball, it's such an artistic sport because it's such a free-flowing thing. That's why -- less patterns, more rhythm.

It's such an improvisational game, and it's changed that way. You know what I'm saying? It requires so much mental agility, similar -- and you have to really be, whatever, like listening in music, really listening to the other musicians and helping them play well. That's to me the same thing as what we're doing.

Serving the game is the same way. Is everybody -- I'm going way back in the machine now but before Corey Glover and Vernon Reed and Will Calhoun, but does everyone remember the first Back to the Future? Do you remember when he took the stage -- I used this example to a player recently and they looked at me like, Back to the Future? I was like, Michael J. Fox. And I was like, oh, man, this is really bad. I'm so old.

But to serve the music is to play with -- what is required for the music. When he starts doing that guitar solo from outer space and the rest of the bands stops. Before he was serving the music and everyone could recognize the song. His chops are great, but it don't fit the song.

It stopped the whole band.

I think that's serving the game, too. You might have some great individual tools that you've worked on all summer, but if it's not happening within the framework and other people

can't play well with you, you're definitely not trying to win.

That's serving the game. I think it's the reason why Charlie Watts was the perfect drummer for The Rolling Stones. Most technical drummer of all time? No. Best timekeeper in rock and roll? Maybe.

I just think pulling all that stuff in is important to keep you inspired. Well, for me personally, keeps me inspired to keep thinking about things and challenging the people I work with.

It just keeps it fresh and interesting.

I couldn't just resort it -- to me personally and most people don't probably want to hear this, but if it just comes down to a lucky roll or lucky bounce and that's the definition of success because the ball happens to go in or out or someone hits 11 threes on you in a game, okay, but life is a little more nuanced than that.

So let's have a little more interest and a little more creativity and a little less fixed mindset.

Q. Your development and knowledge of Chet was set back a year. Is there anything the injury did to help him? Are there ways that he is better or further advanced because he wasn't able to play last season, and what are those things?

SAM PRESTI: Well, he has a touch of gray now because he's one year in. I think the ability to see the season unfold, watch the guys go through kind of what that's like, terminology-wise, understanding some of those just like natural things schematically -- now, a lot of that will evolve and change quite frankly, but he knows the principles.

Q. He would have gotten that anyway if he had played. Anything unique he got by sitting out?

SAM PRESTI: He definitely got stronger. There's in-season training and then there's off-season performance training. He was able to be in off-season performance training regimen.

We got to learn a lot about him as a worker, in a setting where -- this isn't something that could have happened.

You learn so much about somebody when they're put in that situation. I mean, that's a pretty tough situation. You've got to come in every day. Everyone else is getting ready to play that night. You're still on a scooter. Your Super Bowl that day is moving your ankle up and down. That's your Super Bowl. That takes tremendous, rigorous mindset.

I remember we won a game one night, it was like an exciting game down the stretch type win. I can't remember where we were. I was on the road at a college game, and I may have mentioned this, but I was just thinking to myself, what's Chet thinking right now, because the whole world -- everyone was so excited and he's like on the periphery of that.

So just calling him and explaining to him, you're going to be part of that. That's coming. You've just got to -- you cannot skip any steps on this rehab. You have to throw all your energy into the rehab. You're going to be in the mix. Like you're not going to be a bystander in this stuff.

It's hard when you have street clothes on and your work that day was done at 11:00 with a very laborious rehab. The drudgery. But his mindset is for real. That to me, I think it's really validated the mindset.

I don't know if we would have seen him put in a precarious position like that. He's going to be tested all year because a guy that challenges shots like this, he's going to get dunked on. There's going to be some rust. We have to work with it until we get it right.

What position, I know that's a big question. We don't know the answer to that, but he doesn't play one -- he's not going to play one spot the whole game. He's going to play everywhere. He's going to play with different players. We'll find different match-ups. He might play one position on one end and he might play another position on the other.

But the mindset is for real, and I think that much we learned because he was put in such an immersive situation, very challenging. Most people I don't think would have been able to bring the best of themselves every day to something so monotonous. That's a pretty telling sign in my opinion.

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