

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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Mark Daigneault

Press Conference



MARK DAIGNEAULT: Start with some thank yous before we get going. I want to thank our fans. Obviously there's a special bond between the team and the fans. The fans at the airport last night, the fans in the stands, especially during the playoffs, and then in their living rooms, hopefully families get to bond over this team, and hopefully we represent the community well and make them proud.

I want to thank you guys for your coverage and interest and being a conduit for the fans and for your professionalism and respect during the course of the season.

I want to thank Mr. Bennett and Sam for the resources and support that we get. Everybody in the organization, players, staff, coaches, we get to do our best work and have every opportunity to do our best work because of this important resourcing we get from the top, and we don't take that for granted one day.

I want to thank our staff, coaches, medical performance, operations, PR -- everybody that's moving with the team for months of time away from the family and full commitment to our players and coaches that just allow us to put our head down and focus on competition.

I want to thank the front office, everybody that does all the invisible work, put us in position to be successful. We have first class people here that deserve acknowledgement.

Finally, I just want to -- I'll mention this at some point as we go, but I want to thank our players. Special group of people, special season. We believe we're building something special as well, and it's all because of them, because of the people they are, the way they go about their business. I'm just humbled to be able to coach them.

It's a privilege, like I said, to coach them, and I'm very thankful for the experience we all had this year because of them.

Q. What have you learned about this team in the playoffs specifically in the two series?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I would zoom it out to the whole -- I think this time of year, obviously it's fresh, but if you look a year ago at the trajectory of the team, the trajectory of individual players, the growth of the team, I think we made a ton of progress.

Now, at the end of every season, you're never like putting the finishing touches on the picture under any circumstance. So we have a long way to go, and we have a lot of progress in front of us and a long road to do that. But I'm incredibly encouraged by the progress we did make in that. These are high-level games that taught individual players where they need to improve. They taught us as a team where we need to improve. We'll learn those lessons as we let it sink in.

I think it's important to also take a step back and look at the big picture. The big picture is very encouraging.

Q. I was going to ask specifically about the possible launching pad that this can be. Being in Dallas, being in those situations, for a group of young guys who are going to be together for a while, how can you take this and push forward?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I wouldn't limit it to this playoff run. It's not a singular point in time that's the launching pad. This has been a deliberate build over four years that some of these guys have been a part of, and most of them have come on board over that time. It's been incremental.

I would say we've had a very consistent environment. We've had very high standards that our players have met and exceeded, and that puts us in positions to continue to grow and progress. As we move forward, that's what we need to double down on, is meeting those standards, being together, competing together, professionalism, attacking the program -- all the things that we've been about for four years, we just have to double down on moving forward.

That's what's yielded the growth and success that we've had, and if we want to have growth and success in the future, that's what we have to invest in.

Q. How would you answer those that say you should have made a move at the trade deadline and get a big that would have helped you out this time of year?

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MARK DAIGNEAULT: I said this last night, going into the playoffs, at the point in the regular season, I thought we had everything we needed with this team to be the best team that we could.

We proved in the regular season with the season we had, that there's no one we couldn't beat literally. It's just never my mentality to look left and right. Looking right in front of me, we had everything we needed. We had a special group of guys. Part of what made them special is how they operated collectively.

I thought from a team standpoint we had what we needed to win this series, and we ran into a team that played better than we did. But I don't think that's an indictment on the roster. I don't think that's an indictment on any individual person or where we are. It's simply we could have played better in the series, but it wasn't an indictment on anything else.

Q. It's easy for a crop of young guys to get a one-track mind and only focus on how to get their career started. A guy like Shai to focus on trying to get awards and everything, and Chet trying to establish themselves in the NBA. You did a really good job managing all of those personalities, making sure they stayed on track. I know you talk about how it's mostly all them, but what role did you feel like you played in helping them stay within the team?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I think what made this team -- I use the word "uncommon" a lot. I think what made this team uncommon is NBA players could potentially look at themselves as independent contractors because of just the nature of the business. It can bite into a person's ability to connect to a team and commit to a team, and this is a group of guys that, even at a young point in their careers, with a lot of ambition, they were willing to put the team first. They were willing to make individual sacrifices for the good of the team and bet on the team, and these guys did that this year, and last year and the year before.

I think these last two years specifically have shown the power of that. When you're willing to prioritize the team, you're willing to prioritize team success and maybe put a little bit of your individual self aside to do that, these guys put their money where their mouth is on that. The results speak for themselves from a team standpoint.

To answer your question, my job in that is just to guide that process. I can't -- there's no individual person that can make them do that. They have to want to do that. They have to want to commit to that. And to the credit of the players, they did. They deserve the credit for what we

accomplished this season.

Q. What kind of luck is it to get a guy like Shai? A guy who, when he comes in, he may not be the same person that he was five years ago than he is now, but the fact that he stayed on track, stayed within the team no matter what.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: With Shai and all of those guys, I don't think any of that is an accident. Them prioritizing the team, prioritizing team success is difficult, especially in the NBA environment that we're in, but it's also in their total control and our total control. They did that. Like I said, to an unbelievable extent.

You mentioned Shai. From Shai to every other player on the team. Again, that's what made this group of guys uncommon, their willingness to put team success and each other, the team ahead of individual pursuits.

Q. You kind of talked about these guys as being sort of intrinsically motivated, the way that you're describing them. You're talking about not looking left or right. Having that in the building, how much does that make you look forward to this summer and what's possible for these guys as they work on their games, as they get back together at certain times to work collectively?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: The first thing now is everybody's got to get away and take a little time. It's obviously important for rejuvenation. I also think it's important for like reflection, like the day after the season is not the best time to really extract the lessons from a long 82-game season. I think a little bit of distance is healthy.

Then when you return to your work, you return to it with kind of fresh eyes, and that includes our players. These guys have proven that with time in the summer, they improve their bodies, they improve their minds, they improve their skills. They improve their games from a stylistic standpoint, and they walk back in the gym in September better than they left it, in this case, May.

That's what I'm most excited about is just cutting these guys loose and letting them do their thing because they've proven time and again that with time and a solid plan, they change and evolve in a positive way, especially with how young the team is.

Q. Forgive me if you were asked this already. I'm not sure about Shai's pressure last night, but he took this extreme level of ownership over the call, the final sequence.

MARK DAIGNEAULT: The foul?

Q. Yes, the foul. Just he even said something like he felt -- it was a certain feeling behind it because the season kind of ended in his hands. Hearing that, what do you feel about that, hearing just the ownership he took over that sequence and everything else?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I'm not surprised because it's him, but this series comes -- at the end of the day, Dallas, over the course of the series, I thought, played better than we did. And they proved that with the way the outcome of the series was.

That doesn't come down to one game. That doesn't come down to one play.

Then the other thing I'd say is you're catching us right after the game. Even today, you're catching us right after the game. We're incredibly disappointed with the outcome of the series and with the way the season ended, but I think it's important to take a step back and understand that we put ourselves in a position to be disappointed in the second round of the playoffs. The reason we're disappointed is because we had a special group of guys that had a special season, and nobody wanted that to end.

Speaking for myself, it was as much as it is advancing in the playoffs, I just want to be around these guys every day. I'm as disappointed as anybody that I don't get to coach this team this season anymore because I took great pleasure in that every single day.

So I think you're getting a little bit of that emotion, but it never comes down to one play. The game is too vast for that to be the case.

Q. Chet had a great rookie year, but it doesn't even look like he's scratched the surface as to what he could be. What do you want to see from him this summer in terms of growth and preparation?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: One thing I'll say, I've gotten two straight days of questions about roster and that sort of thing. We have the youngest corps in the league on a minute per minute basis, and you're asking about Chet.

Right now this is, in my opinion, the lowest level of Chet Holmgren we're going to see, which is pretty exciting. And the reason I'm so confident saying that is because of his appetite for improvement. He's a guy that is incredibly focused. Basketball is his number one priority. He sleeps in his sneakers. He will have a great summer physically and skill-wise.

He's done a great job of working with us as an organization on a plan and sticking to that plan. He did that last summer through the season. He'll do that again this summer. When you've got a guy with that kind of drive that is that -- that plan is that focused and he's willing to execute it the way he is, improvement is very predictable.

So I would say that for him, and I'd also extend that to all of our players. This is a young team that is evolving, and we have runway because of the age of the team and the experience level of the team. A lot of people talked about our experience in a negative fashion this year, like you guys don't have experience. But part of that is it gives you an incredible runway moving forward, and it gives us a lot of optimism as we continue to go.

Q. Talking about roster continuity, are you impressed this season at all about the team giving him their first go at it?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yes, I was impressed by these guys every single day. I keep saying uncommon. I keep saying it was a special team. They impressed the hell out of me. I was in awe of our team many times this season, both in how we handled our setbacks and our adversities, but also on how we handle success.

Handling success when you're a young team is very difficult. That can break you down as much as failure can, especially in the current environment of the NBA. The maturity that we handled our successes with gives me a lot of encouragement as well.

But, yeah, I'm incredibly impressed by our team.

Q. When did you sense that this group was uncommon? Was there a moment? Was there anything last season that you kind of started to sense that? When did that start to seep in?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: My first year.

Q. Your first year?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah. I just think it was -- you know, that year, the second year, right from the jump, there was just a way about these guys, even the guys that aren't here, some of them. It was kind of like the snowball just started rolling in the right direction.

I feel comfortable saying this now, but in my first year -- I referenced this with our team recently, I was -- we were going through a rough skid. We had a home game. We had an arena walk-through, and I was talking about -- we were in the empty arena before a game. This was my first

year. And I was talking to them about putting T-shirts in the seats.

We're going through a tough time now, but the habits, the standards, whatever I was talking about back then, is eventually going to put T-shirts in the seats if we just stay on it and stay with it.

Lu Dort, Shai, Kenrich Williams, Muscala were there, and the snowball was rolling at that time slowly, and it didn't feel like it was picking up a ton of steam, but over time it's just rolled faster and faster and faster, and it's been an incremental thing that has now put T-shirts in the seats.

So the uncommon nature of the team, the special nature of the team, I've always seen that in the corps of players, and as the corps has grown outwards, it's only gained momentum. As the team has gotten better, it's only gained more momentum. What's special about this team is not only what we accomplished, but how we did it. We've been on that track for four years.

Q. How much of your success at this point is -- you can bet in the Draft process how high can somebody jump, the jumpers. How much of where you are today is based on the betting of people? Like who they are as people in addition to that? Do you understand what I'm saying?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Yeah, I think Sam -- Sam and his group's evaluation of that and then prioritization of that. You've got to identify that, number one, but then you have to be willing to prioritize it over something shinier.

The combination of their ability to identify it and then prioritize it in the decision-making process is high level, and that's everything. Like obviously you need a baseline of talent. Obviously you need balance on the roster and different skills and people that can do different things, and you need good players, which we have.

But when you're going through an 82-game season, a multi-year run, summertime, where you're cutting these guys loose and now they're on their own turf and making their own decisions, all those things really come down to a guy's professionalism, a guy's commitment level, a guy's team orientation, their individual character, and like I said, handling success, handling failure.

All that stuff boils down to a person, and so it's massive. It's a secret sauce for different teams. We're not the only team who has that, but we have it. We have it because Sam and his guys have done a great job -- and gals have done a great job of identifying that and, like I said, prioritizing it.

Q. We talked about Chet. With him and Cason both going through this for the first time -- they played all 82 games. They come into the playoffs with confidence -- what does that say about their motor and what you saw from them this season?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Really impressive capacity, first of all, talent. They're really good players with a high capacity. They're quick studies. They made plenty of mistakes, but they learned from them very quickly. They don't make the same mistake twice.

Then it says a lot about, like I said, their toughness, motivation, commitment level. Those guys are the real deal.

Q. Your exact words yesterday were that you wanted the team to use the pain of yesterday as an investment. Do you hope that they weaponize that feeling?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Like I said, we had a special enough season to be disappointed in the second round of the playoffs. I have no problem walking in here today saying that we're disappointed with the end of the season. We should be.

But at the end of the day, if you look at great players, if you look at great teams and you look back at the bread crumbs of what led to their greatness, there's a lot of struggle, and there's a lot of hurdles that they have to overcome, there's a lot of adversities that they have to endure. There's a lot of success they have to endure.

You've got to use every experience for forward momentum. Our team should use being the Number 1 seed in the Western Conference, a tough Western Conference, and winning however many games we won, as motivation to understand what we're capable of. And we should also use a playoff series loss to Dallas as motivation.

All of those experiences matter, and we've got to learn the lessons from the experiences regardless of how they felt, good or bad, and churn that into work this summer and come back in the fall and be better individually and get ready to be better as a team.

Q. You've said a couple of times just how much you enjoy coaching this team. Just where does this team rank in terms of maybe your favorite team you've ever coached?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I don't rank them. It's a pleasure to coach any team any year, but yeah, this was -- there was

no day that I walked into work and it felt like work this year. This was an absolute pleasure to coach this team.

Even when you're down by, whatever, 30 points in a game, there's no team I'd rather be coaching down 30. We were in the opposite situation quite a bit this year, and that was a pleasure as well. You can't take for granted that coaching good teams is always enjoyable and fulfilling. I think there's a lot of situations where the team is good for reasons of talent and things like that, but it doesn't feel the way this felt. This felt right, success and failure.

Q. You might have mentioned some of that in that last answer, but last night you mentioned how you really wanted to be at practice, and I got the sense that it wasn't mostly based on wanting to continue the series.

I mean, I know you wanted to continue the series, but more based on you wanted to be around the team. What is it about this team that you want to be around them so much?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: They're awesome. You guys see them. They're a great group of guys. They're professional. They have a great time, but not when it's time to work. Like their head's down. They attack it. They compete together. They have a growth mindset through the ups and downs of a season. They're willing to play individually in ways that are helpful to the team.

That's what you want to coach. It's a privilege to coach them.

Q. Do they make you feel youthful?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Youthful? I'm 39 years old. I should feel youthful.

Q. What was it like just to watch Shai to go from a star into superstardom?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: I don't look at it like that, no disrespect to your question. What's been most impressive to me about Shai is just the incremental improvement that he's made over time, which I think has gotten more and more invisible as he's gotten better and better.

I think it's easy to get awestruck by his talent and what he's accomplishing and how efficiently he does it and the place that he's carved out in the league. But the secret behind that is very consistent work, very targeted work, and incremental improvement. If you look back at his first year -- or four years ago, his defense from then to now, his style on offense from then to now, he's now playing a style. He's on a track or playing a style that allows his teammates to rise with him.

He was always kind of there from a personality standpoint, but his style has evolved incredibly, in a way that's really helped our team. He's improved his shooting. He's become more efficient. He's made his leadership. He's made incredible improvements in so many different areas.

That's what's most impressive to me. I don't see him as star to superstar. I see him as a guy who puts his head down and improves day by day. The cumulative effect of that, where he's gotten to, it shows the power of it.

Q. How do you kind of attack this off-season? Do you rest for a couple of weeks? How do you go about this to get you guys ready for next year?

MARK DAIGNEAULT: Me personally? I've got to spend a lot of time with my kids. It's maybe 100 days on the road or something like that. So a lot of that.

I usually work pretty good. I have a hard time like stopping my work flow, like hard stop right after the season. So I kind of like just let it fade. I'll work pretty good here in the next couple weeks, reflecting on the stuff that's fresh, and then letting that sit for a couple months. Then I crank it back up in August.

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