

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

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## Sam Presti

### Press Conference



Good morning. It's really great to have everybody with us today as we close out the 16th season of Thunder basketball and look forward to the 17th. Want to just start with a few thank yous. Just want to thank all of our fans from around the world, in the city, in the community, all of our partners, people that are involved with the team, engaged with the team, support the team, everybody in basketball operations that gives up so much time in their personal lives to be a part of what it is that we're doing on a day in and day out basis.

Again, just a special thanks to the community and the relationship that we have with them as well as everybody in the room, the media, everybody that tells our story to the fans on a daily basis and has done that for so long. Such a big part of what it is that we do. So we're super grateful for that.

I also just wanted to take a second to recognize -- I was thinking about Bob Barry, Jr., recently, and it will be nine years in June that we lost him. He was obviously a huge factor in the community, a huge member of the media. I think it's important that we continue to keep his memory alive. He was a great supporter of the team, had a great energy about him.

Never want to lose an opportunity to reflect on the people that have been a big part of our journey. Want to make sure we do that.

With that, I'll open it up with any questions you guys have.

**Q. You've had some great players here over the course of time, some Hall of Fame players over the 16 years, and you've got this new group of players now, some of those guys are really tracking towards having incredible careers. I was wondering what you think these guys have maybe in common or different from some of the other high-level players you've had here over time.**

SAM PRESTI: We've been super blessed with a lot of different elite players in a short amount of time, and we're

always grateful for that. In my experience so far, the thing that I have tried to really study and tried to learn as much as I can is what makes and separates these elite guys because I think it's more their differences than their commonalities. You can't get to that status unless you're a hard worker, you take your profession seriously. There's just some baseline things.

But each one of them that I've had the ability to be around and observe has something about them that is like a point of difference. I've really tried to understand, like, why they're in it, why they're doing it, how to try to support their goals and the potential that they're trying to recognize, regardless of where they are in their career.

It's been a big learning experience for me personally.

The one thing that I do think is a big differentiator. I guess you could call it a commonality. But the best players are the secure players. The best players are the secure players, the players that can see clearly their own limitations and not just the limitations of their teammates or their opponents, but also that clarity and security allows them to see the things that they can do and work toward to improve.

I really think that's a big one, especially in today's day and age.

Obviously with Shai, because he's the most present in my mind, I think he's a secure player. I think that he is able to see himself clearly and isn't always looking at the shortcomings of others. He's not burning a lot of emotion on that. He's burning his emotion on how to improve and not always looking outwardly because I think he's confident. I think that's a sign of a -- you have to be pretty confident and have blinders like that if you're going to be performing night in and night out at that level.

**Q. You used the metaphor about buying paint for a house before you actually buy the house in reference to not knowing what the team might need before it sort of revealed itself. In this first go-around in the playoffs, what revealed itself as far as needs?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, when I said that, I think the thing you have to think about there is it's not just a matter of knowing what you need. It's really a matter of knowing what you



have. It's not a matter of knowing what you need. It's a matter of knowing what you have. That's as important as anything.

I think one of the things that we learned is we have, like, a really good base to work with. If we went down the path, like a more performative outside acquisition like a lot of people were asking for, I don't think we'd know nearly as much about the team.

I remember saying, and everybody wanted us to cobble together our draft tools and add a star, and the question I asked was are we sure we don't have some players amongst us that could potentially walk in those shoes at some point? And if we were to be -- try and accelerate something that maybe is best organically, could we be suppressing that potential?

I think we learned that we do have some guys in Chet and Jalen that are certainly not there yet, but I wouldn't bet against them.

I think the other thing that we learned is that we're kind of a one-of-one situation because we still have so much more to do and we have a lot to learn and we have a lot of experiences we need to gather and go through, but we can't take away the fact that this was the youngest team in history to win a playoff series, win a division, finish first in a conference, and the Western Conference was not for the faint of heart. It never is, but certainly an accomplishment in that right.

So I think we learned that we are like historic in that sense. Now, that doesn't promise us anything next year.

I think it's naturally easy to pin our limitations and our shortcomings on things that maybe another team that's more conventional or more traditional may have, but I think it's important to note that we also haven't been at it as long as some of those teams, too.

I think we've learned quite a bit.

I also think it's important to recognize we lost 58 games two years ago and won 57 this year. So I'm not surprised that we're not like a complete or perfect team. I mean, no team is, but certainly not going to be a complete and perfect team in a two-year window like that.

We didn't mortgage our future to get that result. We didn't do anything performative to accelerate that process.

I think we learned that we have a good start and we have a really good base. It's hard to compare us to -- or run the NBA tropes out there because there's not a lot of examples

of teams like this. I guess that could make it more difficult for that reason.

But I'm glad we took the path that we did. Ultimately we trusted the team.

**Q. You alluded to some of the noise at the trade deadline, why didn't they do more, stuff like that, be more aggressive. How did you guys approach the trade deadline, and with the team with its standing at or near the top of the west, how did that impact your thinking there?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I wasn't referring to the trade deadline. I'm happy to answer the question, but I was referring to the beginning of the season when people were -- I don't think people were really clamoring for that at the trade deadline. It was more at the beginning of the year.

Trade deadline, the one thing that we have to look at is where we were and where we finished. One, after the trade deadline, we weren't in first place, and after the season, after the regular season concluded, we ended up in first place.

The team really surged after that. I think a big part of it is we didn't manipulate it to a huge degree. Obviously we made the trade for Gordon, and you guys can ask me about that separately if you want. I'm happy to talk about it. I just don't want to get diverted with this particular question. That trade is like a multidimensional trade for us, right?

You're consolidating three players who ultimately would like to play more. You're clearing up a significant amount of future salary, and you're bringing a player in who you think very highly of who you don't -- who seemingly fits the style in which you play.

I do think it's real -- that particular period was very instructive because I think it's a good learning opportunity for us that this particular team or iteration of the team could be really challenging to add to in the middle of the season, and we were trying to be as delicate as we could.

Now, I like how it ended because we obviously were significantly better at the end of the year than we were at the deadline. If we did something else, I don't know that it would have taken away from the formula that we had kind of found for the year.

I mean, even the rebounding, like, which I know is a question that we'll talk about. After the trade deadline we were the 10th best defensive rebounding team in the league. Now, I'm not saying that was because of the trade

deadline. I think it was probably a factor, a lot of different factors. But by continuing to trust the team, at the end of the day I felt that's what we did. We finished with the best record, the first division.

We certainly could have done some things different. If we did, I don't know that it could have been better. It could have been worse, I don't know. It just would have been different.

But I do think it's instructive just with our play style, and when you have a good thing moving, manipulating that doesn't mean it always gets better. It could obviously get worse.

I think we tried to thread the needle, and I'm pleased with where we ended.

**Q. You mentioned this particular team was -- might be difficult to add to. Is that because of play style?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, yeah, I think for sure, I think play style is the first thing because of the way we play, the continuity that we're establishing. This particular year we were the second best or third best NET rating team in the league at that point in time, and you have to remember where we started, like, just for context.

At the beginning of the season, there were people that didn't think we were serious that we were going to play Chet at the 5. Chet hadn't played an NBA game. As I said before, we were a year removed from losing 58 games.

We didn't know if you asked at the beginning of the season could J-Will, Isaiah Joe and Aaron Wiggins play in postseason elite competition. I couldn't have answered that question. I'm sure some of you could have, but I could not have.

So, like, we were learning through the entire year, and that to me -- I didn't want to really disrupt that learning process. I felt that we could still finish and maybe be better than we were because the team has continually gotten better.

In Gordon's defense, I agree with him on a lot of that. We were really surging at that time, and it's hard to, I think, bring somebody in that -- I think he used the phrase, like, when the train is moving or something like that, and that's accurate, especially when we're asking him and other players to do some things that are maybe different than they have done in the past, especially if there's a role that's significantly different.

So I just think it's something we have to be cognizant of as we go forward because we're really learning still so much

about ourselves and the team.

The other thing is we were a different team in the second half, also, just because of the development of our players. We were at the point where guys were getting better every five to ten games. In the case of Wallace on a 10-game increment was really improving, and you don't know where that's going to end up.

The beauty to me about where we are as a team is that type of evolution should continue, and the players, they play off of each other that way. Players will look different as their teammates develop into different styles of player. We figure out how to best leverage their strengths.

I don't know that there's a way to accelerate that. I think you kind of have to be patient with it, and in this particular case, I think it worked relatively well.

I'm not saying we'll always operate that way, but I thought it was the best thing, and obviously the future considerations of how that trade accomplished so many things for us -- as I said, not only did we clear the roster spots to get two veteran guys onto the team, big guys onto the team, but we also cleared roster spots for the summer, and salary room, too.

There's a lot of reasons for it, but I was pleased with the outcome.

**Q. Mark was Coach of the Year this year. What stands out to you most about the leap he took this season?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I wouldn't limit it just to Mark. I think it's him and his entire coaching staff. I think we have a really good group of coaches led by Mark. I wouldn't say that there's a leap, per se. I still contend that some of the best work and the most meaningful work that Mark and the coaches did was in his first year when a lot of the things that we're leaning on now are bearing some fruit and some benefit now. We're really taking place or being laid down.

Now, sometimes I think your best coaching or your best stuff is not -- it's happening before it's really being recognized. But he's done a fabulous job. His coaching staff and all the different people that support the coaching staff, our medical group, our performance group, everyone that's involved in our player development village, so to speak, everybody has played a part in that success.

The coaches have done an excellent job, I think, of maintaining an open mind, which I think is really hard to do as you encounter more success, but to me that's the mark of a constant learner, and that's what we're -- when we hired Mark, one of the things that we talked about was we

want a continuous learner. We want somebody that is curious about the game.

You don't want that curiosity to start to dissipate as you're getting more success or accolades. That's when the fight really begins, to be honest with you, in my opinion. So I have to continue to create the best environment for our coaches and our staff and everybody to continue to maintain that approach.

Trying to look at things differently or staying open and not, like, white knuckling every moment can be an uncomfortable place to be in pro sports, but I also think it's a place we'd rather be than with the mask collection. The strength in numbers is in the middle there. So I think he's continued to do a good job.

**Q. How do you view this team's identity style distinctly, and how might that change in the summer or how much of that might remain?**

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a great question. The answer is, I'd say, in progress. I think that we found a formula this season that obviously worked to get us to be a top-5 offense, a top-5 defense, the most historic offense in Thunder history, the fourth best offense in the history of the league.

At the beginning of the year, we didn't know that was going to happen. Two years ago I think we were 28th in offense -- most of our offense, defense and overall NET numbers started -- we were either in the back 20s two years ago, middle of the pack last year, and now we're in the top 5. I mean, I can sit here and act like I'm unhappy with that, but I don't think you guys will buy that.

Yeah, of course we're proud of the progress we've made over those two years, like I said, without anything performative happening, really without a whole lot of different -- we didn't really add a whole lot. That stuff just kind of has happened through continuity, exposure, player development, experimentation. That's how we've kind of stumbled on to some of these things.

Even the defense and the rebounding, like, we obviously are not a great rebounding team. But I'd rather be a really good defensive team than a great rebounding team. That's not to say that we can't bring that up. We certainly can.

But I also think in context, as I said, the last, whatever, 35 games we were 10th in the league defensive rebounding, and that was with no real change in personnel.

But we also are last in the -- I think second or third last in the league giving up rebounds to smalls, to perimeter

players.

You also have to look at it in the context that we're less than 1 percent away as a defensive rebounding team percentage-wise to the Clippers, to the Pacers, to the 76ers -- well, the Pacers were like .002 percent away from their defensive rebounding numbers, and we're one rebound away per game from being 15th in the league.

So you spread that over 82 games, we all remember the certain moments where we feel a certain way, and I'd agree with that. We can certainly bring that up. But I would like to try to do that without manipulating or bringing down what's really driving a top-5 defense.

I think the other thing about the defense that we learned was we're second in the league in rim protection. We're second in the league behind Boston. We're ahead of Minnesota for stopping shots at the rim.

Now, not to get too granular on this, if you're creating a lot of misses at the rim, that's also a lot of rebounds at the rim, which is where most offensive rebounds are gobbled up and taken. And so because of our lot of our schemes and the schemes that have got us a top-5 defense, we are pulling over and we have an elite rim protector in Holmgren, but cleaning up the mess after that, once those shots are missed and we're playing at that kind of -- that's where we're really open sometimes. Part of that is we've got a small guy in that position on purpose because of the way we're trying to generate turnovers, and as I said before, it's a bit of an unorthodox formula. It worked for us, but to answer your question, we're not set in any way. I think our way is to maintain an open mind, to have a beginner's mindset about everything.

We talked about that when we were losing 58 and 50-something games, and we weren't talking about that as a bridge to get to a place where we were a more respectable team. Those are really the way we think.

We're not trying to prove anybody wrong by being a bad rebounding team and trying to win. We'd love to be great at everything. But we don't want to create a hole in -- solve one area and create three holes in another area that we're scrambling to fix in another way. We're just trying to find the best way to win.

I wouldn't say that we have found that, because our team is also going to change quite a bit just with the amount of development the players are going to undergo.

**Q. Is it safe to say as a thought that maybe if you get a big -- people look at rebound numbers and say, plug him in there, but you also have a style of play that fits**

**with what you want to do. Is there any truth to that in terms of just a certain kind of big that fits the way you want to play?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I think every team is looking at it that way, right? If you are just -- here's another way to look at that. We played J-Will and Chet together for 2 and a half percent of our possessions this year, and that was our choice. We chose to do that. By doing that, we got a top-5 defense.

So I wouldn't want to lose the outcome of a top-5 defense in the pursuit of trying to find the next Wayne Embry.

We've got to continually work and try to improve all of these different areas, but not at the expense of what's kind of generating our success. Now, could that formula change over -- absolutely. It absolutely could change.

But I think we have to be careful about taking something that has worked well for us, especially in season, taking something that is like generating the second best NET rating in the league and thinking that we can just keep all the good parts and bring the floor up on something else.

Yeah, we're looking for the players that help us maintain our strengths and would raise the floor on our limitations, but we are doing that. Like I said before, we're not trying to prove anybody wrong. But we are a work in progress because it's an organic project, and it's still in its infancy, and we showed progress in the last 30 games of the year.

Quite frankly, if you look at the postseason, the least surprising thing to me about the postseason was that we weren't a good rebounding team. It also was not surprising to me that we were a very, very, very good defensive team in the postseason, one of the better teams in the postseason.

What was surprising to me in the postseason was that we dropped off significantly offensively. To me that would be the surprise of the postseason. It's not, geez, they're not rebounding the ball. Well, haven't really been a huge strength of the team. What has been a huge strength of the team in the regular season was our offense. We really struggled offensively in both series for the most part. That's a learning process.

When I say that, I say that with optimism because this was our first attempt at postseason success with this iteration of the team. This was our first attempt at postseason success with this iteration of the team. To connect it to Joe's earlier question, that's the value of trusting the team through that, and then you get to see where the resistance is and where we are bumping our head a little bit.

I think we can solve a lot of those things, but that exposure has been really, really helpful. But our defense held up. Our offense struggled.

**Q. When you talk about that, as you've looked at that and you diagnose those offensive struggles in the Playoffs, it seemed to me you guys were getting shots that you would have liked to have gotten, but from your perspective, were you? Were you getting shots you wanted offensively in the playoffs, or was it more a question of not getting the best stuff you could --**

SAM PRESTI: I think it's a combination. I think it's a combination of both things. I think we demonstrated that we could play at a historically high level offensively. Like I said, it was our best offensive team in history here, and we've had some good ones. It also was the fourth best in the history of the league.

But for a team that's as young as us to go out and now put that into practice against playoff teams and especially when we got to the second round, a really -- Dallas is a really good defensive team. That is going to make us better. We will be reaping the benefits of that. Do you know what I'm saying?

I'm not, like, causing -- it's not a matter of, geez, what's the problem. It's we've got to be a little more intentional. I thought Dallas was a superior passing team in that series. That's not because we weren't trying to pass. But they have a little more experience against that level of resistance defensively, and I thought they were just a half a tick -- it made it harder for us to get out to their players.

But I think we're going to get better at that because we've seen this. We've seen this now. We also know what we're capable of.

To have the offensive struggle that we did in the postseason in, whatever it would be, four out of six games in that one particular series, that happened like twice during the year that we would have that kind of -- but that's what's quirky about the playoffs. You play 82 games, and you end up in these matchups, and it's kind of a coin flip in terms of how the teams match up, who's playing well, who's healthy. It's just a real coin flip in those situations.

You've got to be prepared to endure those things, but in my opinion, we got so much out of that postseason. I feel like we got better every single -- I wanted us to keep winning, not just to keep winning, but because if we kept winning, we kept getting better every shootaround, every practice, every film session.

Remember now, you go back to where we were the beginning of the year. Chet hadn't played a game. Dub had put together, like, a really good second half of the season, but he hadn't played 82 games at this kind of level.

We still had so many things that were unknown about the team, and then to be able to get that kind of experience and exposure, that was fantastic. I thought the Play-In the year before helped us. We just have to make sure we don't lose sight of the things that the playoffs forces you to do, you know what I'm saying, in the postseason.

But in no way am I disappointed with where we were in the postseason. I just think if we would have played a little longer, we would have made some shots, we would have figured it out a little bit. But that's a process that every team has to go through. Those are the necessary steps. I'm proud of how we managed it.

That series was a -- the point differential in that series was zero. There's a couple things here or there, but I did feel like they're the superior passing team. They're also a little more experienced than we are, and I think we have the ability to be on that level.

Regular season, I think you can win with the dribble. Postseason, I think you win with the pass. Then in the -- toward the end of the game, your best players got to make the plays off the dribble, which we all know. I think our intentions were good. We just hadn't seen that yet. I think we'll get better with it.

**Q. You have a few extensions coming up the next few summers. You have a lot of money to deal with this off-season. With the changes in the CBA, how much is financial flexibility going to be for you guys because those extensions can get pretty expensive. Not getting ahead of ourselves, but they can get up there.**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think the first thing you've got to think about is how do we get to this point in time. We got here by, I think, trying to be extremely thoughtful, trying to be disciplined, trying to operate kind of with, like, independent thinking about how to build the team from the ground up, and now we're in a position where we have some flexibility, as you said. We have some players under contract that we'll be able to have those conversations with that are still quite young.

I really can't get into -- I don't even know -- the rules have changed so much, I don't even know what I can say on these things. I would just say we have young players that we think are going to get better and are going to improve over a long period of time that we'd love to have with us.

In terms of the actual finances, I think for us, it's important to note, one -- again, I don't know what I can say here, but there appears to be a TV deal that could potentially get done. That would be extremely beneficial for our team. In the event expansion ever took place in the NBA, that would be extremely financially beneficial for our team. And we have a new arena, fortunately, coming to Oklahoma City, which is a big economic component to our entire apparatus.

So those financial inputs, potential financial inputs, could be significant for us as the second smallest market in the league.

I feel really good about the health of the organization in that respect.

**Q. There was obviously so much joy with this team on the court, and after talking to all the guys in their end of season interviews it was very clear that that joy spilled out off the court, as well, in the locker room, showing up to work every day. What was your perspective of the chemistry of this team?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, every team is so different. Like, every team is so different. We've had some real fun, like, sidebars that have taken place over time. We had the barking this year. We did get Gordon to bark. So we have that going for us.

We had the Stash Brothers thing. We had that thing going. We had the Thunder U thing going early on. Now, if you really want to feel old, one of the guys from Thunder U is not only graduated but he's working for us now, Eric Maynor. So we've had some of these things.

Every team is super different. It all comes from the players, the personalities of the players, and we've got a great group that way. They're joyful. They are optimistic. They're fun to be around. You don't have to lighten them up, which I think is good. We've had some teams in the past that we've had to kind of break the ice with occasionally.

I'll give you a funny story on this. The Statute of Limitations is over here. It's really my own Statute of Limitations. So when we were in the -- I can't remember, we were playing San Antonio in the playoffs, and it was during this really weird time where the NBA was cracking down on the dress code, but they were also starting to promote the outfits. So it was like they're calling us and threatening to fine us, but then the marketing team -- their marketing team was plastering pictures of Russell walking in.

They liked to give us a hard time I felt. They called me the day of a playoff game in San Antonio, so it was either the second round or Western Conference Finals, and they're like, you need to talk to Westbrook about what he's wearing. I go, it's the day of a playoff game. He might have some chaps and a cowboy hat -- I don't know what the guy is wearing, but we're on the road. I don't know if he's got another -- he's definitely not walking in in sweatpants. I can tell you that. He may not play.

So I waited -- because they were really giving us a hard time about this. We're going to fine you guys if he doesn't do this. I thought it was kind of ridiculous.

So I called Ray Westbrook, his brother. I said, I need you to get me an outfit of Russell's. So I dressed up in one of Russell's -- a sleeveless hooded sweatshirt, leather pants, and a gold -- he had this gold lion medallion, which when I picked it up, it was so cheap -- I was like, Russ, come on, man. I know what you make; we don't have to -- (laughter).

Because the team was very tight and it was so serious -- it's a serious group. This was Adams, Derek Fisher, Durant, Westbrook, Ibaka. It's not a bowl of cherries in there every day, and that's why this particular team was good. But I walked in wearing Russell's clothes and didn't really break character and was just like, guys, we've got to talk about the dress code.

It was like the only way I could get to that topic at that time and not have it seem like it was going to be the straw that just cracked the environment.

So every team is different. You wouldn't have to do that. I could walk in with Shai's clothes and they wouldn't even notice. They don't care. They don't care. You know what I mean?

But it's really hard to get Serge to laugh, and when we got him to laugh, it was like, this is going okay. This is going okay.

I love watching the way that every team is different. It doesn't matter to me what the dynamic is, as long as it's theirs and it puts them in the best position to perform at the highest level.

Our job is to try to create an environment where they can find that level to the best of their abilities and usher along in certain places if it's getting a little too loose or a little too tight. It comes from the guys, and we've got really joyful guys.

**Q. Is there any photo evidence of that outfit?**

SAM PRESTI: I'm not going to mention that. I'm not going there.

**Q. You had your Boston Globe piece resurface online recently. How did that come to be, and was that one of your earliest memories when you realized this was something you wanted to do?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, so I assumed I was going to get this question. I think it's very evident that I was acting like a Twitter user in 1993. I was frequently wrong but never in doubt. I had 100 percent confidence in my opinion with 10 percent of the information. And I was an expert with no expertise, and I should apologize to Chris Wallace, who was the GM at that time.

In all seriousness, you guys know I'm joking about that --

**Q. Did he remember you?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I hope he wasn't reading the letters to the editor at that time. No, but Chris Wallace is amongst a long line of elder statesmen that have been so good to me over my career. I've been so lucky with that. When I first started, Donnie Walsh, unbelievable to me. Unbelievable. Rod Thorn was very good to me. Kevin O'Connor from the Jazz was a huge mentor of mine. A gentlemen named Steve Yoder, head coach of Ball State, who sat next to me the first game I ever scouted, and it was a Kansas game at Baylor and I had never scouted a game before and we were sitting right on the court and it was a huge upset. In fact, Collison was playing in the game, I still tell him this story. And Kansas was great, Baylor wasn't very good. Baylor is going to beat them, and the place is going crazy, and Steve Yoder said to me, we've got to get out of here. I'm like, what are you talking about, Coach? My eyes are so wide, I'm so happy that I'm in the NBA, that someone is paying me to watch basketball. He's like, we've got to get out of here. They're going to storm the court. He pulled me and we walked out of there, and he was right, boom, they came on the court and everything. So Steve Yoder saved my life.

So just a million people. Sam Shuler, who worked with me in San Antonio, was unbelievable mentor for me. Wayne Embry, who I mentioned earlier. I could have signed him to solve the rebound problem. The list goes on. Jerry West, he tried to take my lunch money, though, a few different times when I got started in Seattle.

But these people, we're all lucky that those people were around before us and they were so good to me.

With respect to what you were saying about the letter, I think from what I understand -- I certainly knew about it. It

was an assignment when I was in high school. I think it was 1993, so I must have been a sophomore. I was not a great student in high school, so I'm sure I painfully did that, and somehow it got published.

I think they -- I wasn't part of the book that they did. I passed on that. But they must have researched it and found it, from what I understand. That's what they said. But it's like super humbling. And to talk to Jason Kidd, he brought it up to me before the series started because someone had asked him about it.

It was great because I remember he opened my eyes while I was watching college basketball, and some of the stuff he was doing -- I think Cousy may have been doing stuff like that, but it was in black and white at that time and it didn't connect me as much as the guy that was doing it in real time and getting offensive rebounds and firing it to Lamond Murray in the corner from like 20 feet away off the rebound. I was like, I didn't even know you could do that. Or just the speed up the floor he would take.

He was a very good defender, and it just opened your eyes to how the game can be played differently.

But there I was, like I said before, frequently wrong but never in doubt. I'm aware of that.

**Q. Talk about Josh's year, the on court stuff, the off court stuff, and where he fits into all of that.**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I think with him specifically, a couple things. One, it was an up-and-down year. He would, I think, acknowledge that. He's 21, so 21 year olds generally have up-and-down years.

I think the thing that is really interesting about his path -- and everyone's path is different. I think if you've been covering the team for any amount of time, you know that that's a big factor in the way that we think about things. No one has the same path, and that's a big part of player development, in my opinion, is really trying to understand the history, the person, the circumstances in which they're coming into the league.

He came into the league, as I said before, we were losing 58 games. So he got started quickly. Then as the team got better and better and better, he's seen some resistance with some of that.

The thing about Giddey that I really respect is he is tough and he is clutch. He is tough and he is clutch. He has been asked to change some things and adjust to different things, and he hasn't flinched one time. He has never, to my knowledge, come to anyone and said, I need more this,

I need more that, what about me. He's trying to figure out how to best help the team.

He has to get better, but the team also has to get better. So part of the things that we're facing with the cross-matching is -- I think Mark may have said this, but just to be clear, the cross-matching is an acknowledgment by the other team of their limitations to defend Holmgren. So the other team's limitations to defend Holmgren are what creates the cross-matching for us, which is a great thing, because we have a player in Holmgren who is so unique that they're scheming against the youngest team in the league. That's happened a lot for us.

We've seen so many different schemes. The trapping on Shai -- that gave us a lot of trouble against Dallas the first time we saw that. We got better at it. We've seen several different types of zones. I think we've got better at those. We've seen the cross-matching. We've seen some half-court trapping. We've seen some different things that because the team has progressed, we're getting to see a sharper blade, so to speak.

But with the cross-matching, Josh certainly has to work on that. I think he's gotten better and better at it.

Then also, the more Chet is able to abuse and dominate those matchups, and also on the offensive board if you're going to put a smaller player on him, I think that's going to make us a better team because I think that's the main thing is we have to figure out how to be the best team and not isolate it to, like, individual players.

But at 21 years old, he's stubborn. He's stubborn about -- when I say about stubborn, I mean that in an endearing way. He's confident. In the way that I think a lot of people would like to see him capitulate and give in, he's not doing that. He's not doing that. That's something that I like about him.

We've got to channel it and keep working with it, but there's not a lot of 21 year old guys playing on 57-win teams. We have to continue to figure out how to lean into the things he does to help amplify our team.

The idea is to take the thing -- he does a couple things as a passer that are better than 95, 99 percent of the people in the NBA. How do we incorporate that in a way that helps our team?

So that's a bit of a -- that's the bit of the puzzle, but as I said before, I'm not surprised that after two years ago losing 58 and this year winning 57 that we don't have all that figured out. That's not really surprising to me. But you'd like to figure out how to leverage those things.



We think about the development of a few guys specifically -- it took Shai three years to become the defender he is. Let's think about where Lu Dort was a couple years ago. There was a lot being talked about Lu's shot selection and decision making. Not from anyone in this room, of course, but just in general. Lu is maybe our best example of player development recently.

How did that happen? It's through refinement. Lu Dort has become an exceptionally more valuable player by refining what he does. It's not always, like, expanding. Everybody thinks about expanding your game. He's actually brought that down.

A couple years ago I introduced this idea of the mixing board. You can't have everybody turned up to 11 because if someone is turned to 11, you can't hear anybody else on the song. So we have to figure out -- Lu brought his volume down, and that probably allowed Dub some more possessions to explore and figure out who he's going to be. Lu actually became more valuable.

I think in the NBA -- or in sports in general, we get obsessed with degree of difficulty, and as -- and what I do, I'm not impressed with degree of difficulty. I'm impressed with degree of simplicity. You're really good if you can be extremely effective without it looking that hard. If we're having to make it look that hard, it's probably not sustainable, and there's probably other things we can be doing.

I think Lu has really, really embodied that. I'm saying that to Joel under the umbrella of I think Giddey is going to be on that path just like these other guys were. He happens to be much younger than those guys, but I think he's going to be a good player for those reasons. But it's not a snap thing. It's not something that -- he's got to improve; he knows that. We have to continue to find the way to leverage and lean into the things he does at a very, very high level, but not at the expense of the rest of the team, either.

So because we're a work in progress very much, the team is going to change. In the first mountain, 2010 to 2011, 2012, the jumps that the players made in those periods of time were significant, and as they got better, the team looked different with each jump that the individuals made, and then you have to kind of figure out how do you make it all work.

But you can't be the team five years from now, now. You have to -- I'll say this probably again. We're on a journey with these players. We're on a journey with these players. We're learning with them and learning about them and

trying to support them through that period of time.

It's not all going to be easy. When we were rebuilding the team, there was a lot of concerns about the amount of losing, even though it didn't turn out to be that much. It was a two-year window. But I said, you can't bubble wrap people from adversity. When people get to a successful point in their career or their life or their job, they always look back and talk about what? All the adversity.

But then we also can't shy away from the fact that when we run into adversity or a player runs into a hard time or we make a mistake or something, we can't shrink. We have to see that as, well, this will be something we look back on in time.

I think the team is going to go through plenty of adversity. But in order to get to be the team we ultimately want to be, we can't rush that.

**Q. How are you approaching extension talks with Josh, and if his future is with this team, what does that role look like?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, kind of what I just said. He's 21. He's part of a team that's had a lot of success. He certainly has things he's got to work on like every player. The development process for some of our best players has been years long, and we have to continue to figure out the best ways to leverage some of the unique gifts that he has to help us win at a high level.

That is how I would look at his future. People would ask me, well, what about the fit? I was like, well, the fit last year or the fit before or the fit this year or the fit next year? We're assuming with that question that the team will be frozen in time and this will be the only version of the team when the reality is the team is going to change significantly from, as I said before, continuity, the razor's edge of competition and what the competition teaches us about us and how to adjust, from natural organic development, from outside addition, and from, like I said, the exposure that we're going to get with the games that we play.

So I couldn't predict the -- oh, what the fit will be. I will tell you that he won't have to fit on this team because that team is over. This team will look different next year and the year after that and the year after that.

We'll sit down and have those conversations relative to his contract when those are appropriate, but we also don't have to do anything right now, either, because he has another year.

I'm super open-minded about all of our players and where I

think they can get to.

**Q. You mentioned Josh on the court, but obviously there were a lot of things off the court. You've got a 21 year old who's going on the road, getting booed, and at the same time being 21, dealing with the cross-matchups. How, as an organization, was the process of walking him through all the different things he was going through this season?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, we try to support all of our guys as they're going through different things. Obviously the personal thing, that's off to the side. That's a personal matter. I can't really get into that.

But he made it -- he showed up every day, and as I said before, his ability to compartmentalize and show up in every situation, he's been pretty durable. I don't know the numbers, but I feel like he's played in, like, 98 percent of the games or something.

But guys go through challenges. If we didn't think that the guys we have weren't resilient, we wouldn't draft them. He's had to do some things, but that's part of being a professional. I think he's a significantly better player at the end of this season than he was at the end of last year. I don't think that's debatable. He's definitely a more well-rounded player.

I don't have the numbers in front of me, but I'm sure his free throw numbers are up, I think his three-point shooting is up. Bottom line is we don't get out of the first round in the fashion we did without a lot of his play.

Like I said before, he's tough-minded and he's clutch, but he's young, and he's got a lot of things he's got to work on, but I've never seen anything from him that would indicate to me that he's not willing to do that, not willing to take accountability for things, or really consumed with, like, his personal agenda.

I do think there's a big difference -- we have some very ambitious guys. I think of Holmgren this way. Chet is ambitious, but he doesn't have an agenda. I think we have a lot of guys that are ambitious, but they don't have an agenda. I'm good with that. I'd like to have that. You want people that are ambitious, but you don't want them to have an agenda that is accompanying that that can work in contrast with the team's.

We talk in the beginning of the year every year about the silent forces of the NBA. Those are real. They're alive. They're at your walls every day. The NBA is very much churning from a league of competition to a league of envy, and I think when envy is driving things versus competition,

I think sometimes that can overwhelm people, and when that happens, it really screws your team up.

We're trying to really work hard at keeping that top of mind. Our players have done the work.

At the beginning of the year, we talked about being a young team, but you can be young and you can be mature. So there's a difference between youth and maturity. I think the guys have demonstrated a tremendous amount of maturity through the last couple years in terms of what they've prioritized, how they've managed the natural pulls. It will only get harder.

As I said before, the playbook in the NBA is create divisiveness and division within the teams that are better than you. We have to be able to withstand that. That's not changing. I think unfortunately that's kind of society today. Rather than hoist your own colors, you're looking to tear someone else's down, and we have to be able to withstand that.

**Q. Thinking about team building, Shai obviously MVP level player is going to have a chance after this contract to be the first \$80 million a year player. Just wonder your thoughts on that and how it pertains to team building.**

SAM PRESTI: Good for him. That's a lot of money. He's earned that position. Several years ago when we traded Chris Paul and handed the ball off to him, he didn't know what would happen.

But he has seized the moment and the opportunity. I think that we had also talked at the beginning of the year, someone asked me a question about Denver. Like why has Denver been successful, or I can't remember. They had just won, so a lot -- not my first rodeo. A lot of times when the team wins or is winning, I get asked about those teams. Hopefully someone is asking one day about our team, to some other people.

I think the thing that's happened in Denver and other places that have long strings of success is this concept of mutual commitment. I think you need to have a mutual commitment with your best players with respect to the super max.

Again, I don't know what I can say. I hope I'm not breaking a rule. But if Shai earns something like that, we need to be in position to provide that and not at the expense of the other players on the team, as well, where it's, hey, because of that, we can't give you this. We can give you that, but we can't do any -- the trust is, hey, we need you to be mutually committed to the Thunder, all in on the Thunder,

in sickness and in health. There's going to be some tough times, but if we're always -- some people at the first drop want to get off the ride. In Denver, I think there has been a mutual commitment to get through some difficult periods of time, and they've stuck together, and you don't really hear a lot of noise about this person's fault or not enough this or not enough that.

I think Shai -- we have to provide that kind of mutual commitment, and if we expect that kind of all-in mentality from him -- because ultimately what we're really doing with these guys, as I said, we're on a journey with them collectively, but individually we are on a path to try to explore their potential with them to figure out how to help them get where they want to go.

That's not a one-stop shop situation. There's going to be a lot of tough breaks in there. But it's remarkable that he's put himself in that position, considering how unknown everything was at that time.

We talked about the financial -- hypothetically, financial inputs that could really help us in that situation, but you want your players achieving those things, and we have to be in position to support those things, but not at the expense of also having some other players that can continue to -- along the journey with him.

I think the last thing on him that I'd want to say about him is I think he's really proud of what he has built here. He's been here -- you're always going to sleep better in a house that you built. You know what I mean? You're always going to rest better in a house where you raised the beams. I know he didn't technically start here, but I feel like his ascent, a big part of his ascent was born with handing him the ball without any promises either way. Just like, hey, we think you can do this. He's taken it and run with it, as have a lot of the other guys that were part of our first team.

The other thing about him is, like, I think he's proud of it, but I also think he doesn't have anyone in his ear telling him not to be proud of it. You know what I mean? I think he doesn't have anyone telling him not to be proud of what he's accomplishing. That, I think, has really freed him up to be a better leader.

**Q. You obviously can't predict the future, but a lot of young teams, a lot of young players coming up in the NBA right now, and I don't know how much you believe in a championship window, but having that MVP level player, Coach of the Year, financial flexibilities you have right now with those guys on cheaper contracts and those young players coming up, how much does that change your aggressiveness**

**or possible aggressiveness that you may or may not have in the, quote-unquote, championship window?**

SAM PRESTI: I'd like to think we're always aggressive. I think some people might -- they may conflate action with aggressiveness. I actually think it's harder to be disciplined and trust your own people than it is to, like I said earlier, just go out and burn the boats, to show everybody that you're being aggressive.

In some cases I think people might think it's aggressive to trust in what you're doing. But I also wouldn't say that we're bound to one thing or one way of doing anything. I think we've demonstrated over a long period of time that we'll make some pretty big decisions.

The other thing is there's a lot of things that we explore or we look at that no one knows about that may not line up.

We're certainly not shutting it down and saying, hey, we're never going to look at an outside addition. Of course we are. We do every year. But we put that through like a certain filter, decision-making filter, to kind of let us know whether we think this is a positive value decision or maybe something that doesn't really line up and maybe it's just more optical.

But we'll go as fast as we can but as slow as we have to.

**Q. You kind of touched on this preseason just about the (indiscernible) talking about Denver really, but Shai rejected that idea when he talked to us. I just wonder when talking about Denver you said that the mutual commitment, when that is maybe severed is when people get to talking about window. Are there circumstances that transcend maybe that mutual commitment?**

SAM PRESTI: I don't think there's really anything that goes beyond the trust and the commitment that a player like that and the organization have. I don't know if I'm missing the question, but at the end of the day, the windows and the timelines, that is like -- that's, like, external stuff. I don't mean to say -- no one talks about that inside of a team. Do you know what I'm saying?

I don't know how else to explain it.

I also think it's also not, like, an obvious thing. All these things are very nuanced. I'm sure there's a million ways in which I could get to "yes" to your answer, but you'd have to play out a million different scenarios to get to that.

The people that -- I gave you that long list of people at the beginning that were so good to me in my early years. I

think if I asked all of them, like, if there's -- like gave them a situation or potential team-building question, I don't think they'd look at me ever and say, oh, yeah, it's obvious. You know what I'm saying?

Basketball in and of itself, just the game itself, is totally unknowable. If you go back and look at the top ten teams at the beginning of the season that everybody had ranked as to who would be the best teams in the league, one of them are still playing: Boston. One.

I don't know that anybody had the four teams in the Conference Finals that they had in the Conference Finals. It's never like an obvious answer. If it's obvious to you, then that to me means, like, you need to check your work because as people, we're always looking to get to the answer we want as fast as we can and with as little effort as possible. That's how we are wired.

If you're getting to something like, oh, yeah, that's obvious, they need to do that, and I do that all the time because I'm a fan of other sports, but I have the benefit of working in sports. Like if I'm watching a football team, I'll be like, well, geez, they should just do that, and then I realize, wait a second, the closest I'm getting to the team is I'm watching it. I'm not, like, inside the team at all. I don't know what's going on in the team. I don't know the dynamics.

As I said before, 100 percent confidence, 10 percent of the information.

It's a lot easier when you don't have all the info. So to your answer, I'm sure there's a scenario in which my answer would be different, but all these things are so nuanced. They're so layered. That's why I put, like, the mutual commitment thing above all because it's more flexible than making it like a pass-fail or up-down decision.

**Q. With that Dallas-Minnesota series, do you guys take any solace with how close you were to forcing a Game 7 with Dallas? It was tied point differential wise and now they're three up.**

SAM PRESTI: No, I'm not. I'm not saying that. That would be an example, though, of, like, saying to ourselves, oh, yeah, because they're not doing -- they're beating them, that means we're good.

**Q. Is it instructive at all watching this series compared to how you all --**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, always. It's always helpful. But I don't think it's as easy as looking at something and saying, well, because they did this and they did this against us, this means we're this. There's so much more involved in that.

But here's what I would take from it. The west is exceptionally good. Since I've been doing this, and one thing is very true, the longer I do this, the more I realize I don't know, because you're seeing things that you thought played out one way, and they played out totally different over time. I really realize how little I know the longer I do it.

One thing I'm pretty confident is the west has been dominant for a very long time, and when I think about where we were -- I'm maybe getting my timelines mixed up a little bit. But there was a period of time where in the west you had Garnett, Duncan, Kobe, Shaq, Pau Gasol, Steve Nash and that whole crew of Amar'e and -- Kidd may have been in there, Yao Ming. I'm missing monsters. I know I'm missing -- oh, Carmelo, Chauncey, Kenyon -- like all the fame in the west. That's just the west.

I'm fascinated. I wonder if people will look back in time at this era of the west as it's unfolding now and there will be, like, that level of concentrated talent.

So the big takeaway is these games are really good. My other big takeaway is Dallas can really pass.

**Q. The west has been the better conference for so long. At this point it can't be random. I know some of it can be market days to ownership days. What's your theory of why the west has been dominant?**

SAM PRESTI: It's a similar thing. I don't have an answer for that. It's like an unknowable thing. Whatever the first thing that jumps to my mind in it probably isn't the right answer. So I'd start with unpacking that, like why is that wrong?

But I don't know the answer to that. But it's hard to dispute it. It's hard to dispute it. That's not a knock on the other conference at all. The east is great, and the top of the east is always really good.

There's just so many good players and so many good teams in the NBA right now, and I think a big part of that is because the cap spike in '16 really threw the equilibrium of the league off for, like, a half a decade. We're now kind of coming out of that. Like, we're spitting the fumes out of the tailpipe of that particular engine, and we're getting to a point in time -- I think a big part of this is Curry's influence on the game and how that has influenced -- Curry should go into the Hall of Fame as a player and as a contributor because he has changed youth basketball in a way that has made the influx of players coming into the NBA so much more prepared and skilled. The drafts are significantly better.

The parity of the league now is where I think it was heading before the spike. That's a great thing for the league. That's a great thing for the league. People don't really know what's going to happen -- now, that wouldn't change the predictions because the predictions are always inaccurate at the beginning of the season, but that's why no one goes back and looks at them, because I think they're fun to do, but no one takes them seriously unless you get it right and then you take a bow. You usually forget -- when everyone is doing their predictions, they never think about how wrong they were before. They just think about how right they're going to be now.

I don't have an answer other than the west is really good.

**Q. One more league-wide question. What did you think of the mid-season officiating change in the way the game was more physical?**

SAM PRESTI: I got -- I have a -- there's several different angles of this to me, and it's not one thing that I think is important as a watch-out. When it comes to officiating, we very rarely complained about officiating. We may have had one or two fines ever in 16 years. We don't really care how it's officiated. We just care that it's equally, fairly distributed. You can't get over a two-year period of time and have another team have a thousand free throw differential. Obviously that's a problem, and if you're not interested in why that's a problem, then you're not interested in fixing the problem.

But the way I would look at that, first I'd start with the schedule, okay? This is less about officiating and more about several different layers of things that I think we need to be taking into consideration as a league.

There was a huge push for the players to play more, right, which I think is a good thing for the league. The phrase was we're an 82-game league. We're not a big load-managing team. But I also think it's a straw man argument to say that load management is about injury prevention. It's really about performance -- maximizing performance than it is injury prevention. I think that's kind of like a false argument on that.

So the first half of the season, stars are playing in 84 percent of the games. So it's a huge win. But they're also incentivized to play in those games because you've got to get to 65 to get your money, to get your recognition. So it's a bit of a carrot system.

After the All Start break, that number dropped to 72 percent, which is one of the lowest numbers we've seen, I think, in the last 10 years.

Then we get to the playoffs, and they're playing -- the stars are playing in 85 percent of the games, okay? That's the second lowest in the last 10 years. Well, part of it is the second half of the schedule this year, because of the In-Season Tournament in my opinion -- I don't think it's my opinion, I think it's a truth, was more compressed and had more back to backs, less days off than any non-COVID schedule since, like, 2015, 2016.

So you've got players playing more for incentive, but in the back half of the schedule -- like every team had a schedule like this, but we had 17 games in a month. We had five back to backs in that month because there's just no room in the schedule, and every team is going through that.

Player participation, schedule compression, and then the free throw component or the foul component, the thing that changed -- whether we say that we changed the rules or we changed the way the rules are being enforced, there was a significant change. There was a bigger drop-off in fouls called than we've ever seen in the history of the league. It wasn't a modification. It was a change. That's fine. That's the rules of the game. That's what happened.

But we went from 22.6 free throws a game per team to 19.8 after the break. Okay, that's three a game. Again, that's the biggest drop in free throws in the second half of the season as far back as you can go data-wise.

That 19.8, if we played a full season at that, that would be the lowest amount of free throws per team in history. So for context, in the '90s, the average team shot 26 and a half free throws per game. That was in brawl ball, right?

So the thing I think we just need to be cognizant of, and it's not intentional, and I don't think it's -- I don't even think it's something to react to yet, but if we have the schedule this compressed because we have a longer All-Star break than we've ever had, we take election day, that day is removed, and we can't have any back to backs during the in-season, those games got to go somewhere, and we're not lengthening the season.

So we have compressed schedule, players are playing more because they have to, which is great, and I think it's a great thing. You can't bubble wrap guys. But then if the physicality is up that high, we have to ask ourselves whether or not -- like we're managing the physicality versus calling the games. I think technically calling the fouls, it's more managing the physicality at this point, which some people love it and it's great. I don't have a problem with it, I just think we need to watch those three components and the availability in the playoffs for the best players, because at the end of the day we need to make sure the best players -- that's the goal of the player participation policy is

to have the best players on the court more. I would say on the court more at the end of the year.

If these things are not working in concert, I think we've just got to keep an eye on it. I wouldn't say it's a problem yet, but we have to kind of watch the physicality buildup and all the things we talked about, because less than 20 free throws a game per team on average, like I said, that would be the lowest in history. I don't think the goal is to, like, get free throws out of the game because free throws are part of basketball.

We had some games this year where there was no free throws. That's not a basketball game. You get free throws in a basketball game.

We have to just figure out if all these things are trending to get the outcome we want, which is the best players on the court as much as possible and in a position to perform at their best. So we've just to flag that.

**Q. Over the four years Mark has been head coach, you guys have been by far the least fined team in the NBA. Last time I checked it was somewhere \$70,000 --**

SAM PRESTI: Except for when I get fined for what I just said. That's going to add to the tally.

**Q. I don't think you guys racked up \$30,000 worth of fines in two months, but no team was under \$220,000 in those four years. You mentioned stuff with Chet and -- these guys just don't get in each other's way. How tough is that to build a team, and not just a team but an organization where people don't get in each other's way and the way Mark cares about the guys and tells them not to get on to the refs, they don't get technicals at all, don't get flagrant -- it's pretty much nonexistent in this organization, and really wondering how tough is that to build that part along with the closeness of the guys?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, I think, again, it's not something I can say we can put in a box and say it's always going to be like that. We might end up getting more fines or something like that. I don't know. It's really not our goal to -- we don't go into the season saying, let's not get fined.

We just want to try to control the things that we can, to be adaptable and roll with the punches as much as we can. Like I said with the mid-season officiating, whether it's turning the dial up or turning the dial down, something changed.

We can't control that. We have to play in it. I thought we did a great job with that. I actually think it helped us get

ready for the playoffs. So I liked that part of it. I just think we need to be careful that all these other objectives don't get an unintended consequence.

Yeah, whatever is thrown at us, we just want to try to be adaptable, control the things we can. We don't want to get in a position where we're always looking outward.

Again, it comes down to the guys. You know what I mean?

We'll be challenged for sure because we have -- as I said earlier, we have really ambitious guys, and I love that. That's going to challenge our culture at some point. It's going to be -- but that's okay. That's all right. It's going to make it stronger in the long run. There will be things that come up that we have to kind of address or try to modify or whatever. That's part of the growth of the players. We've got to let them figure themselves out a little bit with a young team in my opinion, and not try to put them in a box, so to speak. There's going to be times where you draw inside the lines a little bit. Like, it's fine; we might graduate to some of those things.

Our goal is to try to create an environment where we're just kind of focused on ourselves. We talk about stacking possessions. You want to stack possessions. You want to stack months. I said at the beginning of the year, we hadn't played more than one month of really good basketball. We've got to stack months this year. We didn't have a month where we were under a 4.4 NET rating. The year before we had three or four months where we were under zero. That's major progress. That's what we were looking for. But we want to stack seasons. We want to look back over a period of time at a canon of seasons and see what's the identity? What do we have?

To Joel's question earlier, I don't know that we can answer what the identity is right now. Over a period of time we'll answer that.

The mentality of -- it's not novel, but like controlling what's in our control, how do we respond to things versus react to things? Can you have a uniform approach or mindset to try to maintain our emotions during that period of time? That's what we're trying to embed early if we can, and we might get the raw end of it sometimes because we're not throwing our hands up in the air or -- but I just think in the long run, it will best serve us.

**Q. How do you form an environment that allows guys to be consistent from year to year? Like the Shai that you got years ago might not have been the Shai that you got now.**

SAM PRESTI: I wish I could give you an answer to that.

It's not like we have some -- I don't think there's a manual or anything like that. A lot of trial and error, a lot of self-reflection. I think just some of the things we talk about all the time, I think, helps create that. But it comes down to the guys.

We're all here to support the players. The players are what make it all happen. I don't have a job if there's not 450 incredible, amazing athletes that have come from all over the world, from various circumstances to compete and get themselves to a point in time where they have a chair in a locker room in the NBA. That's never lost on me because I certainly didn't have that opportunity.

It's about the guys and how do we best help them achieve their potential and get what they want out of it, and hopefully what they want out of it is to win. But that's hard because you have to make choices as a player, as a young player, what your priorities are, and as I said, holding off a lot of the wolves at the door, because as I said earlier, the league sometimes shifts more to envy than competition. When that starts to permeate someone, that's a really hard thing to fight off, and then your decisions are different.

We try our best to understand the guys and give them the best environment for them to sort that out, but we're not controlling that. I wish I could say we were.

**Q. What are you looking to add player-wise, draft-wise?**

SAM PRESTI: When it comes to the draft, we're looking for the best fits for us. That's always been kind of our mindset. We're going to pass on some players that could go on to have great careers elsewhere. We may not think that they could have the same type of impact or career here for one reason or another.

We generally gravitate to a certain type of player and person. I'd probably say person and player. A lot of it's wanting to be a part of what it is that we're working toward and seeing if we can find self-satisfaction out of being a part of that.

That's a big baseline part of it.

But we don't have, like, a specific -- we're not, like, looking for something specific, like an on-court need or something like that. Good players are really hard to find, like super hard to find. Guys that can play consistently in the NBA and be in the NBA for more than three years, that is not -- that's actually harder than it sounds.

**Q. Do you like the draft?**

SAM PRESTI: I like the draft. I think it's pretty good. I think every one of these is so different. One thing we know historically is that there's good players in there, and they never go in order. Someone is going to come out of the second round, is going to have a huge impact. Someone is going to be picked in the 20s -- there's, like, a 3 percent chance or something you can get, like, a top starter or really good player in the 20s, an all-NBA player in the 20s. That's really, really hard to do, but it happens.

They're in there, but a big part of that is obviously you observe the players, then you evaluate them to decide, and then you have to onboard them, and then you have to develop and work with them, try to understand where they're going and how to get there.

That's different for every player and every organization, and sometimes it can be a really good player, but the potential -- the fit or -- just not as much symmetry there for whatever reason. So guys go on to find success maybe somewhere else.

But the players are there. It's just can you line up with somebody and figure out a way to help them reach their potential with you? Sometimes it's not that easy.

**Q. (Indiscernible).**

SAM PRESTI: I think the last couple months of the Blue season were huge for him. Playing in those types of games, carrying that kind of responsibility. He also -- he cranked it up developmentally during the postseason for us where he was -- we flipped his summer program and got it going early because we thought he's going to be potentially playing for the national team so we need to get as much done with him as possible. But I was very pleased with how he ended the season. I was very pleased with how he ended the season.

Like every young player, he has so many things to work on. When we drafted him, he was almost like a year young for that draft. We kind of knew that his timeline and his pathway would maybe be different, certainly from Dub because Dub was somebody coming in that we thought could get on the court sooner. But Ous has responded pretty well. I'm pleased with him. I think he's made some big strides here.

**Q. Following up on Shai's ascension, you mentioned earlier, from the outside looking in, some other factors just off the court of his mentality, his growth as a leader. In a league as talented as it is today, what separates a star from a franchise star like Shai?**

SAM PRESTI: I don't know because I don't know -- one

person's franchise star could be some -- I would just say he's the right guy for us. I don't know how to categorize that other than, as I said before, he's a secure player. He's a guy that sees himself clearly, sees himself and not just looking around at others.

He's got, like, an extremely consistent mentality and work ethic. He's got great equilibrium as a person, and he's extremely bright.

His views on competition and improvement are really sophisticated, and I love talking to him about that. I learn a lot from him when we talk about those things.

But he's also, like, a colossal competitor. That's a great combination.

**Q. Are you able to comment on the TV deal, upcoming?**

SAM PRESTI: I don't want to touch that other than hopefully everyone gets what they'd want, but I can't really talk about it.

**Q. You did say you would expand on Corey later on. I want to ask you to do that and maybe explain where you saw the disconnect and what you thought generally.**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I know some of the things that he said, but I didn't watch it, and I've never read a transcript or anything like that. I have no problem with anything -- whatever he's saying, it's fine.

As I said, I think it was a bit of a tough situation. You know what I mean? To go from always starting to coming to a team that was, like, starting to surge quite a bit, that has a different way of playing. Just wasn't able to get going quite to the level that I think he wanted to. He helped us get to the No. 1 seed. He was in the rotation. He had some nights where he had to start. I think he did help our rebounding quite a bit.

He was totally focused on doing what the team asked him to do. I don't have any knocks on him in that way at all.

But it was instructive to me. The reason why I think I was mentioning that is, instructive to me in that adding someone mid-season like that with our play style, with where the team was and how well the team was playing, trying to do that without taking away from the things that were working in such a strong direction, knowing that we didn't have three, four, five years of that under our belt, this was our first year, where we were playing consecutive months of good basketball. That was a bit of a challenge.

Every one of these things is different. A lot of that's on me, at the end of the day. But I liked how we ended up, because like I said before, we were not -- we weren't first in the west at the time, and I'm not saying it was because of that particular transaction, but it was also probably because we didn't do other things. You know what I'm saying?

But that's how I'd look at it. As I said, it was a multi dimensional thing for us, too, because it's one of those rare trades where -- when you're usually acquiring a player at the trade deadline like that, you're usually not getting great value, right, because you're giving things up for immediate. It's just natural -- it's just how it works. I actually think it worked pretty well for us where we were able to consolidate, like I said before. We opened up salary room, roster room, got those guys into other situations where I thought they could play more than they would with us, which those guys did a great job there.

I miss watching Bertans' shooting workouts. They were amazing, just amazing. He'd get in here by himself with just some coaches, and just the professionalism and just the accuracy, it's just really something to watch him.

It never gets old for me watching these guys do what they do because they're so gifted and they're so talented, and the guys that really work at it have my ultimate respect, especially when you're not playing. Very impressive.

But it was a multiple dimension trade for us. There was one like that a long time ago that I felt worked like that, too, whether we traded Serge for Victor and Sabonis, and I felt that that would have made that particular team, if it stayed together, extraordinarily difficult to beat.

If Kevin were to leave, I still felt like we were going to be good with those particular players under team control going forward versus Serge going to a free agent year.

It's very rare in the league that you can get to the point where a trade fits those parameters. I thought the Herro trade did that for us. I would have liked it to have worked out better for Gordon, but that's just the way it goes.

**Q. You mentioned the trade didn't die on him fitting or not fitting, but did he see that he wouldn't be able to properly fit in time, and how did that maybe change the way you acquired people mid-season moving forward?**

SAM PRESTI: That's what I'm saying is that I missed on that. Like, that's on me. But I'm learning. I'm trying to learn this team. I'm trying to learn the pace of the team a little bit. I'm just trying to be a great observer of the team



as it's going through these paces, knowing that it's really going to change on its own, in and of itself.

Our team, the last 20 games, was significantly different than the first 20 games. This is the same players. You know what I mean? But significantly different.

Every time someone changes or develops or we stumble onto something, it changes the rest of the team and how they can perform. I think it's pretty nuanced and textureized, but I don't think I read that one perfect, and I'm learning from that in terms of bringing somebody mid-season and -- especially early on in the process for our team.

**Q. You kind of hit on these points here and there, but what do you think about the new changes in the NBA, the In-Season Tournament, 65-game rule, Jaylen Brown rule, just all those different things this year?**

SAM PRESTI: I'm all for the importance of the players being as available as possible and very supportive of that. There probably did need to be some correction on that. There's no question about that.

In-Season Tournament I've been a big proponent of that. Again, like the league really asked us to get behind that, and we try to be good partners as much as we can. I just think flagging -- when you have so many new things that you're implementing, I just think we've got to look and see how they're colliding with each other and if they're actually giving us what we ultimately want, which is as many players playing at the right time, but I think the league is in a great place. Adam is just a miraculous visionary for the business. Thinking about where we were as a league 10 years ago and the things we're doing now, I think it's great.

We also need to be not sanctimonious about the game, but I do think we have to make sure that we protect the game because that's what people really come to watch is the competition. You want it to be recognizable; you know what I'm saying? I just think that's an important thing. Not that we're on a bad path with that, but I think that's the north star at the end of the day. It has to be something people can connect to.

We're building all kinds of new fans. There may be people that don't like the In-Season Tournament because it's different, and that generally is what happens when you put something that's different in front of people, they generally don't like it right away, but there's probably a 10 year old kid who just started liking the NBA, he thinks the In-Season Tournament is just part of the deal. Maybe they get excited about it.

But I'm all for all the different things. I just want to protect the players. I think that's the main thing. We're really over here on player health and wellness, and I feel like we could end up over here with a lot of these new objectives.

One thing I think should happen is we should have the medical arm of the NBA office, Dr. John DiFiori and David Weiss, they should have final approval on the schedule. They should have input on the schedule because they have conducted all these studies on load management and have a very clear idea of who should be playing and when they should be playing. I think that they should be very involved with the schedule making so they can stamp it and say, yes, these are suitable. People shouldn't be calling us and saying they need to rest players for whatever reason.

I just think getting them involved in the schedule would be a huge win and would, I think, take some of the bemoaning and criticism from the teams away. If you already had the medical folks say, yeah, this is suitable for NBA athletes. I just think it would be extremely innovative to do that, and we're the most innovative league, so why are we holding them back from getting more involved and being a part of the scheduling?

**Q. What's the logic behind the second challenge if you lose your time-out if you get it right?**

SAM PRESTI: I used to be on the competition committee, but I rolled off, so I'm not really totally sure on all the debate on that, but most all the decisions are based on game length. People don't want the game getting longer. They want it getting shorter. I'm all for that, but again, it's still basketball. You can't personally -- baseball is nine innings. It takes nine innings to play. Some people like it, some people don't like it. If you don't like it, you probably don't watch it or you probably don't go. There's fouls in basketball. We can't just take everything out that makes the game longer just because it makes the game longer. You could start losing the game.

But the challenges are awesome. They're great. The people that I think deserve the most credit on the challenges are the refs because to go to the monitor and see something that you missed -- now it's still a judgment call, so you can find a lot of ways to talk yourself into, nope, this was right, I made the right call. But I think more than half of these get overturned it and get deemed correct. Maybe more than that. I don't know.

But the refs have a really hard job because they're just administering the rules that the NBA makes. They don't make the rules. They have to enforce the rules.

The challenges are a new thing. It obviously helps accuracy. I give them all the credit in the world because that's a hard thing to do, to go look at that right away. The best of the best, they're not wrong that often, but they're administering what they are told to administer, and I think sometimes people have the impressions that the officials are making up the rules -- they are not. They are handed the rules and told this is what we want, and the competition committee is a part of that, as well.

**Q. If you lose your time-out but they correct the mistake they made --**

SAM PRESTI: Again, time-outs and fouls make the game longer, so they're trying to reduce those.

**Q. Earlier you cited something about the strides you guys took as a defensive rebounding team post-All-Star break. To get to where you want to be ultimately as a rebounding team, do you think that can be achieved internally with the guys that you have or is that more talent acquisition?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, we can't guarantee talent acquisition because there's certainly players that we would love to have that I think would really help our team. The other teams are not willing to just give us those players.

Unless we can improve ourselves internally, which somehow we were improved in the second half of the season, not enough. Like we weren't able to do that for the full year. But I think it probably has to be a combination, but also like the maturity of the team also will help that.

I just want to make sure that we don't lose sight of what the goal is, which is to have the best defense. So if we were really good at rebounding, had a top-5 defense but were really bad at getting turnovers, I don't think anybody would care about that. You know what I mean? I don't think they'd care.

But because the thing that we're not good at is something that's unorthodox, it's easy to look at us and go, well, other teams have this or look this way. That's the problem. It kind of opens us up because it's a unique formula.

We get that, but we can't, like, go door to door explaining to everybody why we're doing this or why we're doing that. Yeah, someone once said, we can't spend all day -- this is -- Ralph Waldo Emerson said, you can't spend all day in explanation. Sometimes we've just got to do the thing that we think is working for the time being. We're not married to just doing it that way, but the schemes this year helped us get a ton of turnovers, forced a lot of tough shots. Second in the league in rim protection. That is going to create a lot

of rebounds at the rim. We could do a better job there.

But we're also turning the teams over quite a bit. We'd like to get better at everything. And we're not trying to prove anybody wrong by being a bad rebounding team and it being good. We're trying to just be good. If there's another way to do that, we're open to that. We're not resisting that. That could be an outside acquisition.

But we're going to look at all those channels.

**Q. When you think about the op ed you wrote five years ago, what do you remember about your head space back then compared to now?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, the thing I think about that, and I think I've said this to people here before, but I was writing that kind of letter while we were in the midst of trading Westbrook, so I was talking to Daryl Morey and we were negotiating, and I was talking to Russell because that was a place he wanted to go, and I was trying to land the plane there the best that I could. In between, I was trying to capture kind of my thoughts on what was potentially ahead.

So the process of that is what I really think back on.

But a lot of those things are still very alive to me. The things that we're talking about or we're seeing, I think if you went back and looked at those, the words, I'm probably seeing -- I have strains of whatever I'm saying today is very much connected to a lot of the things we're talking about. Not in terms of, well, this was -- no one knew where we would end up in any way, shape or form, but the principles are still the way we're operating. Those weren't principles to get through a period of time. Those are principles to kind of live by.

So that's how I'd reflect on that.

**Q. Do you ever go back and read that?**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, I do. I do. I mean, not often, but occasionally I'll go back and look at it because I think sometimes in everything that we do, sometimes you can get away from your tentpoles or your pillars, so to speak. It's good to pressure test that occasionally, I think.

So I'll read it for those purposes. Like are we staying true to that?

The intentions are not to -- when you go through a period of time that's difficult, not to have a bridge over that period of time and then all of a sudden just start conforming to what is deemed acceptable after that. Like okay, we did that, we don't have to use these tools anymore, we don't

have to think this way anymore. Now we can think like everybody else. It's more like this is a path that we're on, and it's a highway that doesn't really have -- it's just kind of going. We're just kind of on it trying to learn as much as we can, trying to use these principles as best as we can. That's kind of how I've looked at that.

**Q. When you think about Chet just playing his first full season, and you mentioned earlier Jalen, J-Dub sort of having an up-and-down rookie year but more of a consistent second year, as you think about their off-season, what are your expectations of those two guys, things they'll work on and what are you thinking you'll see out of those two next season?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, the first thing is I love them both. I love them both. Dub to me, the thing about Dub I love the most, he's not a numbers guy. Dub is not a numbers guy. If there's one thing I can say to him, it would be, be yourself. Be who you are. He's a unique guy. He has traveled a different path. I want him to just make sure he maintains that. What makes him different to me is the motor. Two-way player, he's extremely talented, but he's got a great motor, plays both sides of the ball, and he's driven.

I think he's going to come back a better player. I think the playoffs were fantastic for those guys because they had to feel some weight in those moments.

I thought Game 4 and Game 6 on the road, like those were great showings. We didn't get the outcome that we wanted in the series, but to perform and have to execute under duress like that, really impressive.

He's coming. He's coming.

Chet, as I said, the thing about Chet is he's extremely ambitious, but he doesn't have an agenda. We just have to continue to, as I said with Giddey, lean into what it is that Chet has, where he can go, and figure out how to continue to grow that within the framework of the team, because the one thing about Holmgren is he's a colossal competitor, and he's extremely ambitious, but when he gets on the court, it's winning time. He doesn't let that get in the way of what the team needs. Like, that's what I think could make him such a special player. As talented as he is, he never lets his ambition override his teamness. It's impressive.

**Q. As you're talking about that, is there a moment or an instance that is flashing in your mind that illustrates just what you're talking about with Chet?**

SAM PRESTI: Well, one thing I'd say about him is you can coach him in the games. I noticed that. Again, like, I'm

really just trying to observe this thing. I'm trying to learn as much about the guys and the team. I don't have a fixed idea of what it is or what it's going to be. That's hard because I love to fast forward and imagine.

But I think we're really just trying to study it and just kind of watch it happen to a degree.

But I did notice he'll make a mistake or he might, like, do something that's out of character or something, and Mark can really jump him. Holmgren responds to that because I think he knows -- I think that's part of what makes him great. He knows and he wants to do right.

I have so much respect for his -- when we were scouting him -- I watched him a lot in high school, a ton of high school. But I went to watch Gonzaga practice because here's this big-name recruit, clearly going to go high in the draft. It was later in the season, and they were -- it was at University of San Diego.

I just wanted to see him interact -- because there were some older players on that Gonzaga team. As I said before, when you hoist the colors yourself and when you put up the beams, you have more ownership and you sleep better at night. Chet was new to that. Gonzaga, he was extending Gonzaga. They had been good. I was like, how is he going to handle this?

I just wanted to -- I knew the player was not the issue. But he interacted with those guys like he was the 15th guy, and he took direction, he was coachable, he asked questions, he did all the -- every one of these college programs has these traditions that they've done for a long time, and sometimes guys won't do that stuff. I was like, is he going to go through all that -- he went through all that stuff. He was one of the guys.

That goes back to that kind of stuff.

If he maintains that, and I think he will because I just think that's how he is. I think that's how his parents are. I just think that's part of what makes him a special player. Like I said before, we're second in the league in rim protection. I don't think a lot of people knew that. But like that's because that guy is coming -- he's answering the bell all the time. He's a tremendous shot tracer, not just shot blocker, but I noticed that earlier at USA Basketball, and he's playing against Mobley.

He didn't block all those shots, but he was tracing those shots. Like, his hand was right next to it all the time, no fouling. He's got some really great gifts. I just wouldn't want to cap him because there's a lot there.

**Q. He had a great rookie year, but his rookie year was very different because he had an entire year before he even played as a part of the organization.**

SAM PRESTI: Absolutely.

**Q. How beneficial do you think that was?**

SAM PRESTI: Invaluable. I think it was invaluable. When it happened -- we have enough experience here with -- I say the sky falls on every team three times a year, and that certainly felt like that.

But one of the things that you get rewarded with is persistence in this industry, in my opinion and not seeing that as a forecast in a negative light but an opportunity. How are we going to use this to make it a positive? We dove right into that. Chet was amazing with that.

I think he learned a lot about the cadence of the season. He obviously worked on his body. But there's no substitute to actually, actually playing.

But I do think that there's some real benefit to that.

We had to kind of work into the season by kind of -- we had a pretty good year last year. We went from, like I said, 30th in offense and defense to 15th, so we were doing better. We could have just kind of tried to fit him into what we were doing to try to white-knuckle the success that we had had, the moderate success that we had had, but we had to be, again, open, open to what could be, to what are the possibilities if we were to take kind of first principles. How should we approach this? What should we do?

Even just playing him at the 5 as much as we did, we had to see that. We didn't know it was going to result in a top-5 offense. We didn't know that. It could have fallen flat on our face. But there were some positives in that.

We had to work through that, and I think that's a real positive thing that Mark and the coaches were able to do. It wasn't a given. We had to be willing to fail if that wasn't going to work. If it didn't work, we'd adapt and we'd adjust.

But that year prepared us, I think -- we had success, but we needed to have success with him, and how was that going to look.

Now we've got him in a good spot, but as I said, the team is going to change. So everybody is going to -- we're going to have to keep curating? We're going to have to keep curating the team to a degree as these players continue to develop.

**Q. (Indiscernible) and were there any moments in scouting him or the draft process that stood out to you that made you think he could be a contributor?**

SAM PRESTI: I could never tell you if they're going to play right away or anything like that. I wish I had the ability to do that. I never know that.

I always say Sabonis was the guy, I didn't know he would play as much as he did his first year. I always think about that.

So I would never place, like, limitations on someone like oh, they're not going to play or they will play. Well, what's the team? What kind of summer are they having leading up?

But Kasen is a no-agenda player. He has no agenda. He's making the play that's in front of him. So much is made of like, quote-unquote, make a play. Kasen is serving the game. There's a big difference to me between someone that can make a play and someone that can serve the game. He's serving the game.

He's making a decision, the right decision, as to how the game is unfolding without really any thinking. Some people are thinking, should I pass that, because if I do, he might not get an assist. He's just passing to the right person because the game is telling him, and he's serving the game that way. If the game is -- the thing I like about him that really stuck out was all the difficult things that are hard to do as a basketball player, physically he did those eyes wide open. He did not -- he's not closing his eyes getting over the screen. If his job is to block out a guy that's eight inches taller than him, he's driving into that guy's thigh. That's the job, so he's doing it.

There was no moments of indecision, so he has a very clear mind of how to play because he's trying to win.

That's the thing that stuck out to me with him.

**Q. I think you spent time with Jerry Krause in the final months he was alive. Leading up to his death, I think the way he was painted was that he was a sort of lonely but prideful scout, that he even inquired about other minds. He was so into the scouting thing. I wonder if you carry that same feeling, that it's the endless chase and if maybe it has boundaries.**

SAM PRESTI: No. I love watching players. It's how I started. I told you that story about watching Kansas with Coach Yoder. I love watching players. I love watching the development of players. I love watching players achieve their goals. Fascinated by basketball in general, but also

just by these guys that are so good at it.

It's just them and the ball, man. You have to be so good to get a shot off in the NBA, and I have a lot of admiration for the sacrifices that these guys make. They keep the lights on here with the sacrifices that they make. We can say they've got charter jets and they've got all these amenities, and they do, but they've earned it. Their effort has earned it.

Yeah, I like watching players. The reason why is because you never know. You can work at it and try to go back and look at all the ones that I know I'm like I completely botched that. I missed that. How did I miss that? Because so much of it is really random.

We have got a great group of evaluators, and we have since -- I've had the benefit of being here. We've had great evaluators. Every one of them has had a hand in, like, the decisions that were made. They're the unsung guys. They're the guys that are returning, gassing up the rental car at 5:00 in the morning in Des Moines so that they can get on a 6:30 flight to a town and then drive another two hours, and then the guy that they're supposed to go see gets in foul trouble and doesn't play for like 18 minutes of the first half.

But I've been there. I've been there. I know what that's like. But those guys really grind it. Those guys make huge sacrifices being away from their families and stuff like that.

But Krause, the thing that -- he was another one of those guys. Mitch Kupchak is another one of those guys now that I think about it. When you see something that you think is pretty special, you really get that feeling of, wow, that guy might be able to do it at the highest level, because it's not like most players are exhibiting that all the time except for the ones that are extremely loud that everybody knows.

I like that part of it, but I like doing it with our evaluators. I like to listen to what they think and just -- because I learn from them all the time because they're watching it 24 hours a day. But I love to listen to their opinions and who's really passionate about an opinion matters to me, and then most of all, when somebody realizes that they may not know, have a great handle on the guy, be like, you know what, I need to watch more, like let me watch more, like that's a great sign of a good forecaster.

I hate to go to the greatest hits here, but there's two types of forecasters. Those that don't know and those that know they don't know. That's what makes a good scout. It's like, we're all guessing. It's not like we know. It's so random to think that you've got, like, an edge on that. Nah. It's the

players and the kind of competitors they are and workers and then obviously all the different people that touch the players. But it's not like a thing that anyone is better at than anyone else. I really, really believe that.

**Q. With those moments that Jerry described to you --**

SAM PRESTI: Yeah, the electric moments.

**Q. Do you remember having any of those concerning anybody this season?**

SAM PRESTI: Once they're here you mean?

**Q. Yeah.**

SAM PRESTI: J-Will had a block this year that caught me off guard. There was a force that he was able to get off the floor with that was clearly an improvement. To me, I think back on that, all the different people that have worked with him on his conditioning and athletic performance, I mean, that's a village of people. J-Will wasn't moving like that initially. But we have a great group of people, Donnie Strack, Andrew Paul, Jenny Strickler, Vanessa Brooks, all these different people, Kevin Hyde. These people are the glue. It just takes a lot of time, especially with young players, to work with them on those things.

He really, really was moving better for different stretches of the season. That surprised me. That was all hard work. That was earned.

But there's one of those for every guy. I could go through the whole team like that, and every player probably we've ever had to a degree. Like I said about Bertans. He probably didn't play a whole lot, but I liked to watch his workouts. I liked to watch those because, one, it's fascinating, but two, he needs to know, I think, that you're watching, that you see that.

**Q. With the philosophy of drafting people over players, I know you're not trying to put together some big friend group with the guys on the roster, you're trying to win games, but do you take any sort of pride in the chemistry they have on and off the court?**

SAM PRESTI: We can't take pride in it. Well, I guess we're happy about it, but it's not us. It's the players making that decision, this is the kind of team we want to have, these are our priorities. Yeah, no, we're not trying to collect Richie Cunningham all over the place. It's not that. But we do want guys that can plug in to a team but are monster competitors and are super physical, and that's something that has to come over time with a younger team, too.

That's another thing about the rebounding. I think we'll get better. Team will get more physical. We'll get a little more physically stronger. I hate to put it down on that. Like I said before, a lot of it is smalls. We're getting blasted out of the corners. Some of that's fundamental. But to -- I'm not surprised that we have some significant limitations. We're two seasons away from losing 58 games.

Of course we're going to have things we have to work on. I would be surprised if we were sitting here not talking about some type of limitation.

**Q. Going back to Jerry, I don't know if you've watched The Last Dance --**

SAM PRESTI: I haven't watched The Last Dance.

**Q. In the opening moments of The Last Dance, I think the way they set the series up is there's this disconnect between the way the public perceives Jerry's ideals and just the players, the coaches -- Jerry is quoted, he says that players and coaches alone can't win a championship, but the guys this year, unprompted, players, Mark, are just saying how much each individual in the organization matters for this whole thing. I wonder how much you personally preach that and how much you think that matters to winning?**

SAM PRESTI: I mean, I don't know if it's like something that's being preached, but I hope over 16 years here that we've tried to create an environment where people feel like they're a part of what we're doing and sharing in the success of what it is that happens, and also the failure to a degree. Ultimately that's really on me.

But yeah, you want everyone to feel like it ladders up in some way. You know, there's a great story about Lyndon Johnson touring NASA. I think I have this right. This could probably be a change over time, like a game of telephone. But he's touring NASA, and it's an incredible achievement, and he's being walked around with all these people in white coats, scientists, the brightest people in the world, like mathematicians and aerospace experts. He's walking along, and he sees a custodian really cranking on, like, a railing. Like he's polishing the railing. So he's like -- the President is walking by him, and he doesn't notice. So Lyndon Johnson is like, I need to talk to this guy.

So he goes to talk to the custodian. He says, hey, man, why are you so -- why are you working so hard at that, and he's like, because we're trying to put a man on the moon. It's a great story of this person understood that their contribution laddered up to the ultimate goal. I hope if we

ever get to that point where we get the equivalent of that that every person in the organization feels as if they've laddered -- their contribution, no matter what it is, has helped create an environment where that was possible.

So I don't think it's a preaching. I think it's actionable, and it's recognition of the contributions that all these different people have made and make on a regular basis, all without tricking yourself into thinking that -- it is all about the guys, but your contribution is helping create a platform for them.

But that's still a major contribution.

You've got to have -- the gears got to be washed. You know what I mean? You've got to have laces in the shoes. Floors got to be swept so no one gets hurt. Fridge has got to be stocked. Ousmane Dieng is getting worked into the ground by Andrew Paul. Got to be a protein shake there. All that stuff matters. All that stuff matters.

We're trying to have an elite organization for the guys, for the guys.

**Q. I wonder if you've maybe been surprised at all with how young this team is, but how well they've grasped that understanding?**

SAM PRESTI: That goes back to Frank Lloyd Wright said youth is a quality, not a number. I would say the team is youthful, but they're mature. You know what I mean? That takes maturity to see the sacrifice of other people and how that ladders up into what it is that you do. So I think they're mature. We're trying to put them in the best positions to let that really flower out.

But there will be times where there's immaturity, there will be times when there will be mistakes made. We have to give them some grace. We have to understand that although we've had a great year, there's so much to learn, there's so much for us to figure out and learn, but it would be easy to take these days for granted, but you shouldn't. You don't want to look back five, ten years from now and be like, that was a really fun year. Like, how about doing it now, even though we're not promised anything for it? It's only going to get harder. It's only going to be more challenging.

But we should take some enjoyment in the fact that that happened because that can't be taken -- it was historic in a lot of ways. Like I said, that can't be taken away from us.

Now we have to park it and we have to walk a line -- we have to walk the line every day for the next year.

We talked about an arrival versus an appearance and the

difference between that. You know, I know this is not going to go over well for people, but what we have is an appearance. We have an appearance. We have shown up to the postseason. We'll arrive if we can replicate that. If we can replicate that. Because there's a lot of teams that have gotten to the playoffs for one year and then they, for whatever reason, may not be able to get back there.

So the way I would look at that is you can either pick the lock or you can crack the code. Picking the lock, you're stealing it. Cracking the code, you own it. We have to be able to own our success and be able to repeat it, but that's going to take a tremendous amount of humility because we have to -- you get to the bottom, you have to go back to the top of the slide. We have to be able to go back and take everything we've done and try to learn from it and start again, stacking days.

That gets harder because there's more opportunity to depart from that mentality, and that's what makes the great teams great. That's what makes an arrival versus an appearance.

So I think we've got the first step in place, but we have to walk the line toward making it what we set out to do.

**Q. Read any good books lately?**

SAM PRESTI: Thank you.

**Q. Did you know Bill Walton at all?**

SAM PRESTI: I didn't know him, but I was on a run this morning and I was thinking about him, and the thing that struck me is I've never heard anybody articulate their passion for basketball better than this person. His ability to express and articulate his love for the game that so many other people love is unmatched. He also came from a group of people that played for Wooden, which he was exposed to what some would say is the greatest coach ever, and he took all those things from his time there, and he was -- he never conformed to, I think, the way that other people would want him to view the game in terms of how important team is. Those lessons that he learned from Wooden withstood all of the BS that comes along with pro basketball. One, it says that he's special, but also it's such a great example of Wooden who has always talked about the difference between a teacher and a coach.

I was thinking about this, also, recently, and then I'm going to get into the books, but I was thinking about this recently. You want coaches that love players, not coaches that love to coach, and I think we have one.

Do we have anything else? Just the books.

**Q. Maybe some music you've been listening to?**

SAM PRESTI: You'd be disappointed. No, I don't know. I'm pretty out during the music. There's a lot of different things I listen to. Recently, I like Miles Davis a lot, so he's in the rotation a lot. I listen to -- there's a band I kind of fell on to; Metric. That's like new to me. They're a Canadian band. You know I love Tribe Called Quest. This is going on forever, so I'm going to cut it off there. But that's a big part of my life, so I'm going to be very careful with what I'm saying because I want to make sure that I'm digging deep.

Music, that's like a huge passion, huge passion of mine, so I don't -- we could be here forever.

**Q. Do you ever get to be around producing music anymore?**

SAM PRESTI: No, but I still play my drums. I still play. Not any good, but I like to play as much as I can because it's a big -- it was such a big part of my childhood and helps me think. It really helps me think. It's such a -- music is a big thing for just, like, the abstract side of your thinking, your brain. I think it helps with problem solving. I want my kids to play any kind of instrument. I don't care if -- I'm having a struggle with it, though, but I would love for them to just try it because I think it's just a great tool, and I think it opens up different ways of thinking about things.

I spared everybody the open, so I just want to close with just a couple thoughts if that's okay. But I'll try to be as concise as I can. I try to take every single question every year from everybody. I feel like that's my responsibility, but I did want to kind of get away from the open, just to let you guys have the floor for the entire time.

This is where I get to talk to the fans. I really want to thank our fans. Ever since I've been here, I've always felt that there's been tremendous pride in having the team, and I've always felt that. Part of the way I think is because of the way the team arrived. It was here, and we were in a position to -- I should say they, because I wasn't here, were in a position to accept the team from New Orleans because the city had rebuilt itself from its own tragedy. It was a city that could accept and support an NBA franchise that had hit similar distress, its own tragedy.

I think it's understood that, like, we are one of the smallest cities in the NBA, and maybe it wouldn't be top on the list if there was future expansion. So I think there's a recognition of how much pride in having the team.

I also felt that early on in those first kind of playoff runs and things like that, there was intense passion, like, an intense,

intense passion for the team. It's hard to, like, maintain that level of passion. Now, there's people that meet us at the airports, the people that always stand up and clap when we introduce the Thunder legacy guys, the people that no matter what their results are, if they see, like, Lu Dort on the floor or they see Lindy Waters can a three to send the other team to time-out, they stand up and they clap.

What I think I saw this year when we got to the playoffs, when we got to the playoffs, was a similar level of passion that is really exciting, and we're super grateful for that because when you have a passionate group of people in the stands like that, it makes it much harder for the opponent to play. That was a big part of some of the success that we had in the postseason. We finished 6-4 in the postseason, and I thought the passion and the energy, you know what I mean, that was in the arena during the playoff games was really palpable.

We're grateful for that. We also are hopeful that we'll be able to maintain that, continue that, because that's been a big part of our success over time. So I think there's a difference between pride and passion.

When you have both of those, it's very, very powerful. Can't have it all the time because passion is not something you can just have on forever, but I think there were signs of that, which is really special.

As I said, I think it was a great year, and there's still so much to learn and so much to figure out and have a lot of experiences we need to put together. But I think we did learn, not just what we need, but what we have.

I have no idea what the next season is going to bring. We'll sit here in September and people will ask me about all those things. I will say what I always say: I don't know.

But sometimes when you don't know where it is that you're headed or what the final result will be, it helps to know where you are, and I think we're in a good place. I think we're in a good place for a lot of the reasons we talked about.

But we also understand there's no silver platters in Oklahoma City. We're going to have to take it. We're going to have to improve. We're going to have to scratch. We're going to have to claw. We're going to have to battle to get progress, especially in our conference, and our guys are fine with that.

Those are the types of people that we want. We want people that don't need the wind at their back all the time.

I'd say we have to enjoy the ride, like I had mentioned a while back. We don't know exactly where that's going to end, but try to not contort yourself into misery as we find ourselves and go through difficult challenging times. It's a young group of players that will need support, that will not be perfect, that are going to need to continue to find themselves by getting as close to the razor's edge of competition as possible. That's going to make us better.

But I'm very confident that if they maintain their maturity and the way they have committed to one another and the accountability they've shown to winning that good things will happen. But we have to walk the line, and as I said earlier, we can crack the code or we can pick the lock, and we need to crack the code because if we can do that, we can show up again and again, even with the unexpected adversities and curve balls that we're going to get thrown. We have to know our own formula. We have to know how to repeat our success, and it won't be something that is the same each year.

But if we have that mutual commitment and we have the awareness that we have so much to learn, we have to be extremely humble about what we're doing, I think we're headed in the right direction.

So just really thankful to everybody for being here. I hope I got to every single question. I cut out the beginning part. I'm super grateful for the coverage, and we'll talk again in September.

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