

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Monday, June 24, 2024

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Alex Caruso

Press Conference



Q. Welcome to Oklahoma City. I know you're not exactly new to the organization, but what has it been like coming back to the city and walking back into this building?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, it's been nice. Some good memories obviously. This is where, like I said, I started my professional career, so many familiar faces. The continuity of the organization has been great, and I think that will really help me ease back into it, get to know the teammates. The facility is still the same, so I know where everything is at. Just really excited to be here.

Q. From playing against this team over the course of your career, what's been your perspective of the growth and the trajectory of this team as of late?

ALEX CARUSO: Obviously really young, and obviously they've grown up a little bit now, but super competitive. Everything that I've heard from people within the organization is it's a tightknit group that wants to have success and cares about each other, pushes each other, and that seems to be a team that I think I can fit into.

Q. Alex, where were you when you got the news, and what was your immediate reaction?

ALEX CARUSO: I was at home in Austin. That's where I spend the off-season. I was just at home. I was actually like five or ten minutes away from changing and going and hitting golf balls at the driving range.

So I delayed my practice session for the day by a couple of hours. Yeah, I got the call from A.K., and then Sam called me shortly after. Just took it all in stride, had a lot of texts and FaceTimes and calls to answer from teammates, friends, family. Just trying to process it all. All of them obviously wished me the best and were happy for me.

From then, just trying to digest everything and figure out how it's going to look.

Q. Any idea this was going to happen, coming here or

that you would be moved here?

ALEX CARUSO: Not 100 percent. There's been rumors of me being traded for the last couple years around the trade deadline, so I've kind of just gotten used to it. In one ear, out the other. It was a bit of a surprise to me the day it did happen. Usually stuff like that happens centered around the draft and something like that.

Caught a little off guard, but at the end of the day, that's professional sports. You take everything in stride and do the best you can.

Q. How does your game suit the Thunder?

ALEX CARUSO: I think the things that I do well complement the team. Team first guy, I just want to win. That's the biggest thing. Super competitive. I'll sacrifice for the teammates. Obviously I think I had a good year individually last year, shot the ball well, had another good defensive year, took care of the ball mostly.

I think all of those things are things that affect winning and positively affect your teammates. So I think that's something that I think everyone will benefit from.

Q. People talk about winning a championship. You've done that with the Lakers. What does that mean? What can you bring to a young team? You're 30. You're one of the older guys on the team right now.

ALEX CARUSO: Saying that out loud is a lot easier than doing it. There's a lot that goes into it. Showing up every day and going to work, I think is the biggest thing.

Learning from some of the older guys, LeBron, Rondo, Danny Green, just to name a few that I played with, seeing them come in every day, having the habits, having the rituals, being super competitive. A lot of things that I think the Thunder stand for, things that I think I stand for.

Hopefully that's the perfect marriage that everyone says it will be, and hopefully we can find success together.

Q. You had Mark as your coach and then Kam Woods as a teammate. Anything that stood out about those two in particular, any stories about those guys?

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ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, a handful of people, two handfuls of people that were with the Blue, or at least in the OKC organization that are still here that have helped me get started and then get back to this spot.

Mark, I was smiling ear to ear talking to him on the phone just because I was excited to get to play for him again. He told me, Don't be a smart ass, and I told him, I can't wait for him to cuss me out the first practice when I mess something up. So we'll hit the ground running, and it will be great just like it always is.

Both of us, though, a lot of growth from when we first started together. I think there's a lot of positives and a lot of learning experiences that we both can take from those years and come together and hopefully come together and look for more in the future.

Q. Going back to that year you spent with the Blue, obviously you've come a long way since then, but do you think a year in the G-League changes who you are, has impacted who you are as a player?

ALEX CARUSO: That, and my two-way years in L.A., having to really get it out of the mud. You hear that expression a lot, and that may not always be true. But for me, undrafted, there's a story I don't think a lot of people know, there was a week span before I came to the Blue in the training camp where I thought I was going to play in Poland.

A couple days later, I talked to a coach of a team in Germany, and then OKC called, the Blue called, and I came up here, took a physical, took a tour of the practice facility, then started my journey here.

So to go from that, playing a full 50 games with the Blue that year, going to three summer leagues, it just kind of -- it just taught me what I needed to do to get to the level that I wanted to play it. Countless hours, a lot of help, a lot of self belief, a lot of those things are things you need to turn a career from undrafted to the G-League to being in the NBA.

Q. Did you have the ticket to go to Germany? Were you that close?

ALEX CARUSO: I didn't have the ticket. I just talked to the coach on the phone. But I was -- I didn't know what I was going to do, I truly didn't. Coming to OKC just decided, if I was going to try to play in the NBA, I needed to get my foot in the door, and probably the best place I could have done that.

Q. Was there ever a point along the way where you

thought, like you said, three summer leagues, like is this going to happen? Was there ever a moment of that for you, or did you just always believe that it was going to come to fruition?

ALEX CARUSO: A little bit of both. I'd be lying if I didn't say there were days where you feel a little down and the weight or the pressure of getting it done doesn't bear on you. But I'm a really competitive guy, and I think I'm the most competitive with myself. I think I push myself and have high expectations for what I expect myself to bring and how I expect to work.

Then ultimately, I really do just expect to find a way to get it done. That's just something that I was blessed with. I don't know if I curated that from high school, college, younger, but that's something that to my DNA, I expect to get the job done whatever it is.

Q. Alex, you just mentioned how tightknit this group appeared from the outside. Actually it's made of a bunch of young 20-somethings and you've just become the vet here. How are you approaching trying to fit in with that young group?

ALEX CARUSO: Obviously it's a lot, but just taking it in stride. I think I'm a good teammate. I put the others first. I think that's something that goes a long way in this organization and that they do themselves.

So just showing up and being there for the teammates, pushing them to maybe levels they didn't know. Hopefully they can push me too. It's just iron sharpening iron, and hopefully we can find some success from there.

Q. You knew Mark before most of these guys were drafted. You're going to have a different relationship than most of them will have. What are the things that stood out to you about him then, and how much has stood out to you over the years that you've been watching so far?

ALEX CARUSO: It's funny because he still has the same personality and demeanor on the sidelines when I was playing against him in the games than he did when I was playing for him with the Blue. Just quiet, very observant, doesn't always -- I'm sure he's got a few texts now that he's head ball coach and he has to stand up for his guys a little bit more.

Just puts the players first. He's a good leader. I think he knows what it takes to lead, and he lays out the expectations for the team really well, and I think, when you have a young team like the Thunder do, like we do, you take those expectations, and those guys will run through a



wall for a coach that believes in them and trusts them. I think those are some qualities that easily define Mark.

Q. You made All-Defense the last two years. What makes a good defensive player? Is it a personal thing about you, personal pride in that, physical stature? What makes you good defensively?

ALEX CARUSO: A little bit of all of that. Obviously physically, you've got to be able to compete with the best athletes in the world. You've got to be smart. You've got to be disciplined. You've got to be hungry. You've got to be competitive. At the end of the day, you've got to have a little bit of amnesia because guys are going to score.

You all have watched SGA play for the last couple years, best defenders in the world. You can play the best defense you want, but sometimes offense is just going to make shots. Just being ready for the next play.

Q. As a guy who takes so much pride defensively and you look at how good this team has been defensively this year, all the talent defensively, like Lu and Chet, how excited are you?

ALEX CARUSO: Really excited. I looked up YouTubes the other day of them playing defense just to get myself in that head space, and I was really excited for it.

Really competitive, tough, those are things we described as All-Defensive caliber players, good defensive teams, and they have a lot of that. They've got good rim protection, active hands, guys that are willing to sacrifice for the team, those are all things that are important, and I'm excited to add for that.

Q. What are some of the most stark differences you see systematically in terms of the defense in Chicago, defense here, what you might be able to do here with guys like Chet and Lu?

ALEX CARUSO: I just know I'm not going to be the main focus every night defensively. I think in Chicago everyone had me number one on the radar for the defensive game plan. I think with Lu, with Chet, those are guys that you have to account for. So if -- however you want to do it, if you want to put me at the top of the list and overlook them, they're going to take advantage of it. If you want to put them at the top of the list and overlook me, I'm going to take advantage of it.

Just the versatility that those guys bring -- like I said, they're young, they're hungry -- that's something that I look forward to being a part of.

Q. When did you know that defense was going to be part of your calling card? I'm sure in high school, you offensively scored and in the same way. When did you realize as an NBA guy that defense was going to be it for you?

ALEX CARUSO: Probably when they didn't draft me, and I figured out a way to get on the court. That was the big thing, just figure a way to get on the court. Take my 6 minutes, turn it into 8, turn it into 10, turn it into 12. That's kind of what I did when I got to L.A. and I got on the two-way, trial and error.

Luke Walton gave me a great opportunity and threw me in the fire a couple times. Sometimes I failed, and sometimes I had success, but the times that I failed, I learned from it, and I figured out what I needed to do better.

One of those things was, if I could be a non -- if I could be relied on on defense and not be a liability, I could earn myself some minutes and kind of figure it out on offense. I think I've done that now to where I'm pretty much assured of myself on both ends.

Q. Was there anybody in L.A., teammate-wise or coach-wise, to help show you the way or just kind of lead you into that space of really being a defensive guy?

ALEX CARUSO: I don't know if there was one in particular. I think it's just being around greatness. Then I had obviously numerous Hall of Famers on the championship team, and even before that, getting to play around Lonzo a little bit when he was first there, being around Bron obviously makes everybody better, Danny Green, some of the best hands in the game when he was still playing.

Then I think I had a really good mentor in Coby Karl, who was my head coach in South Bay, and he gave me great perspective at times on who I was as a player and what I needed to do to try to improve and be a valuable asset. Him and the whole South Bay organization really did a good job of helping me learn.

So, yeah, just being around greatness, and like I said earlier, just learning from failure.

Q. Any memories that stand out playing for Billy and the Bulls?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, I loved playing my three years with Billy. He's a great coach. Me and him had some really great conversations. Another full circle moment where I was the first guy cut in his offense over there, and he

talked to me and said, I think you can be an NBA player if you work on your shot and work on your body and stay healthy. Those are the things I've done.

It's funny enough that he was my coach for the last three years. I made two All-Defensive teams and had some good personal years. Great memories. I'm still going to -- I'm not going to lose those relationships even though I've left Chicago. I've made great relationships over three years with people in the city, Chicago itself, and then obviously teammates and coaches.

Q. Obviously that team that won a championship with the Lakers, obviously a completely different makeup, different build from this team, but some of that championship DNA, what are some of the maybe components you see that are in this thing as it tries to track towards the championship?

ALEX CARUSO: You've got to be ambitious. Only one team is happy at the end of the year. Every year, the other 29 have got to go back to the drawing board. I know Mark, I know Sam, from the outside looking in, I know what the guys stand for. It's about showing up and going to work every day.

If you want to be great, you've got to be great every day. You can't just turn it on April 16th, 17th, whatever date it is for the playoffs to start. It's just got to become an everyday thing kind of a lifestyle more so than what does it look like written on the wall in shiny letters.

Q. Have you had a chance to talk to any of your new teammates sort of about what's going on, just greeting them?

ALEX CARUSO: I met Jaylin, tall Jaylin today, J-Will, I met him, and then Shai reached out and texted me and said he was excited to have me. He complimented me, and I obviously showered him with praise back because he's a really good player. Told him I'm excited to get going and just ready for the opportunity to play alongside him.

Q. In recent days since the trade, the story you told once on J.J.'s podcast, The Old Man and the Three, about Sam in Sioux Falls answering questions, just core memory, how often do you think back to that and have you talked with him about that since then?

ALEX CARUSO: It's weird. We had lunch today, and I thought about it when I was sitting down at the table talking to him today ironically enough. I haven't, but I'll bring it up to him next time I see him and we'll talk about it.

There was just immeasurable value in him doing that, and I

think it just goes to show the person he is, the leader he is, why the Thunder have found success with his tenure around the organization. He checks boxes, he dots Is, crosses Ts, he makes sure that he invests his time and his sweat equity into the organization, and that's somebody who you'll go to battle with.

Q. Your dad played for Eddie Sutton. What have you heard about Eddie over the years?

ALEX CARUSO: Eddie was -- I didn't hear a lot. I did hear that practices were tough and there were a lot of cuss words, and they were going to play defense. He told me there was a couple practices where they didn't have balls. He just rolled the basketballs into the hallway, and I said, you're dating yourself with that. I don't think anybody is getting away with that nowadays.

Q. There were shoulder pads and helmets at Oklahoma State one time?

ALEX CARUSO: When I was a kid, I was ball boy for A&M when they had that practice. I remember seeing that.

Q. You spent some time in Oklahoma City. A lot has changed since 2016, but what's something you're looking forward to off the court in Oklahoma City?

ALEX CARUSO: I think getting to see the city a little bit more, getting to know the community better. I think my first tenure here, it was so quick, and I was pretty tunnel visioned at the time. I was pretty dead set on anything besides basketball is not really happening. So I might have gone to like a Cinemark once and just hung out with my teammates at the house.

But really getting to know the community, see some of it some more, find some places to eat that are to my liking.

Q. Are you going to be able to watch any of the College World Series Game 3?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, I'm supposed to go to dinner with Mark tonight. I'm going to be checking my phone in between that. We're hoping my Aggies can pull it out.

Q. When you think about that deal, is this a place that you can see yourself for a long time?

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah, I think so. Obviously, I think that conversation is for another place and time. I know what Oklahoma City as an organization stands for. I can obviously tell they've done a good job of bringing together a good team.

So possibly, but I think for now I'd like to just meet my teammates and get to work before we talk about any of that.

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