

Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Saturday, June 29, 2024

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Sam Presti

Nikola Topic

Dillon Jones

Ajay Mitchell

Press Conference



Thunder Community Draft Pick. Stand up, Christine.

(Applause.)

Now we'll welcome to the stage our Thunder draft class of Nikola Topic, Dillon Jones, Ajay Mitchell, and Oklahoma City Thunder president and general manager, Sam Presti.

Sam will have some opening comments here and then we will open it up to media for questions.

THE MODERATOR: I want to welcome everybody to the Oklahoma Contemporary Museum here in beautiful downtown Oklahoma City for our introductory press conference for the Thunder's 2024 draft class.

In a few moments we'll meet our newest Thunder players and hear from Thunder executive vice president and general manager Sam Presti on our newest picks.

But before we do that we want to acknowledge some special people we have in the crowd today. What's become part of a Thunder tradition each year at this event, we welcome some people who are doing amazing things in our community. We call them our Thunder Community Draft Picks, and this year we have four special people with us today.

We have Meghan Mueller who's the president and CEO at the Homeless Alliance.

We have Salvador Ontiveros. He's the president and CEO of the Latino Community Development Agency.

We have Dr. Jamie C. Polk, who is the superintendent of Oklahoma City Public Schools.

And our last Thunder Community Draft Pick this year is a special person we have with us today. This is Christine Berney. She's been with the Thunder since day one. She's been amazing for everything we've done in the community with programming, with the people. She is an absolute star in her role and a star in the community.

She is retiring this summer from her position as the vice president of engagement and community relations, along with being the director of the Thunder Cares Foundation. So we're going to miss her dearly, and she is our last

SAM PRESTI: Good afternoon. Just want to thank everybody for being with us. Again, just want to echo our appreciation for our community draft picks, as well. Special recognition for Christine, who be on the lookout for her next bestseller. She's a talented author, and we're very, very grateful for all of her contributions for the entire time we've been in Oklahoma City.

These days are really exciting. It's a tremendous honor for us, and we're really excited to welcome our new players to the community. We're really excited to welcome their families, their friends, their representation, everybody that's had a huge influence on their lives to get to this point.

Nikola, Dillon and Ajay all come from different places. They have traveled different paths. Now as we get to this point in their careers, they also know that this is just the beginning.

For that beginning to take place in Oklahoma City with the Thunder gives us tremendous honor. It also is a responsibility for us. We take that very seriously. I'm truly excited to see how they work and develop and pursue their potential with Mark, the rest of our coaching staff, and our entire organization as we commit with them to finding the best versions of themselves. I think they're going to be impactful people and players for Oklahoma City and the Thunder for many years to come.

With that, if we could welcome them one more time.

(Applause.)

Q. Nikola, what have you learned about the Thunder and the process they went through with Chet and just your confidence level of entering this year and not being able to play?



NIKOLA TOPIC: Yeah, I mean, I'm really grateful that I'm here with this great organization. I've heard many good things about them from their best player, Vasilije Micic. He talked to me a lot and told me just only the best things about this organization.

I'm really grateful that they have experience with Chet who didn't play his first year, so we assume that will be the case with me.

I'm really, really grateful for the opportunity, and I'll try my best to do my best and to be the best version of myself.

Q. Nikola, I saw that you visited the arena yesterday. Since you've been here and that experience specifically, what have you seen from everything you've just taken in since being here?

NIKOLA TOPIC: Yeah, I've been to the arena. I haven't visited the city yet, but I'm looking forward to it and to see -- to explore the city's restaurants and everything about it.

Already it's amazing to me. Locker rooms, services, gym, weight room, it's just incredible. We don't have that in Europe.

As I said before, I'm really grateful for the time here, and it's really probably the best organization I've been to.

Q. Ajay and Dillon, you guys are both throwbacks in a way in that you spent three and four years at your respective mid-majors. Talk about that commitment and also maybe I'm sure you had offers to go to bigger schools. Why did you want to stay at each of your respective schools?

AJAY MITCHELL: I think for me it was just loyalty. Santa Barbara was the first school to believe in me. Started talking to them when I was 16 and always felt like I wanted to give back to them, so every year have the same mentality of getting better as a person, getting better as a player, and trusting them because they believed in me.

DILLON JONES: Yeah, similar to Ajay. I think for me it was about the different things that I valued when I decided to make the decision to go to college and go to Weber. As things was happening and it unfolded for me, I didn't move off my square. It could have been very easy of me to do things differently when the opportunities presented itself, but when I chose to go to college, I wanted to be in a good situation, good school, focus on player development, and if I did that, I would be right where I want to be.

As that was unfolding, I didn't move off that when it could

have been very easy to. I valued that and thought that was important, so that's what I did.

Q. Sam, I know you've drafted guys that have gone one-and-done or who have transferred, but their paths specifically, do you kind of learn anything about a prospect for a guy who sticks it out at a mid-major for that long?

SAM PRESTI: Sure. I think we've said this for many years and sitting at this table, for each draft we always talk about the fact that we draft people before we draft players. Every single person has their own path, as I was alluding to earlier. They have their own journey, their own experiences. They've had to make their own choices. No one is the same.

I think the consistency of those choices tells you a lot about the individuals. I don't think there's one way to do it. But certainly with these two guys, they've been very focused. I think they've been very diligent. They have made steady progress at each place. I don't know if that progress would have been as steady if they were bouncing around all the time.

I think the biggest commonality with both of these individuals is they have great maturity, and they have great focus. And I think they said before, they have the ability to stick with things, even in the good and the bad, which are good signs in terms of just people in general.

Q. Dillon and Ajay, what particular skills -- the fact that you did spend so much time in college, what skills do you think you improved on from your freshman year to where you are now that got you to this point that you think impressed the Thunder and other NBA teams?

AJAY MITCHELL: I think for me, just developing my IQ and play making. I think also getting stronger. I think as a freshman I was 170 pounds and then every year getting stronger and bigger and being now 200, I think that was a big jump.

But then on the basketball court it was definitely just play making, being able to make plays for myself, for my teammates, and making the right read.

DILLON JONES: For me, going through at Weber and that progress like Sam spoke on, I think I was able to learn, like Weber taught me when I'm in a situation like this is what the guy will need.

I think that perspective was everything, and I learned that through my time at Weber, being held accountable and things like that. I think that's way more important than how

much I got better as a passer or a shooter or whatever.

The fact that I had to be held accountable to the level I was because of where my team needed to be. I think that's what's going to help me be more successful. Like I like to tell people, being the guy made me know what the guy will need from me.

Playing on a team with great players, I think that's what I learned the most, and I'm ready to add that.

Q. Would you share with us what your impressions are of this Thunder team? Have you had a chance to watch this team, and now sort of thinking how you might fit within this roster of players?

NIKOLA TOPIC: A few guys from the team, they sent me welcome messages, and that means a lot to me. That just showed how great they are, not just on the basketball court but off.

We're really excited to play with them. They're all very young and very perspective. I think all three of us can add to it and can translate our games. So we can all be better, and we'll give our best.

DILLON JONES: Yeah, obviously watched a lot of Thunder games. Just a fan of the NBA in general. Young exciting team that's still just finding themselves.

For me it's just all about being a sponge anyway I can be and taking direction from the coaches and whoever else and just trying to put my best foot forward in that, whatever they may need me to do.

AJAY MITCHELL: I think just seeing the team on but also off the court, how close they are, I think that struck me, and I think that's really important.

I think I want to be part of a family, so seeing that was really nice, and I think that's one of the best things here.

Q. Dillon, I wonder if you could describe your journey to this point.

DILLON JONES: Yeah, I mean, it was a journey, a long road traveled. Grew up in certain situations and single-parent household. We was one of those families. Like we didn't know we didn't -- we didn't know we were poor in a way. We just had so much fun with each other.

What the game brought us was more powerful than anything that money could give us. So that was like the road.

When I got the Weber, those were the times that really made me be who I was as a player. As a freshman, I didn't start. I only started two games. Growing up and just being able to continue to every year take it up a level, keep learning, keep growing, that was like the journey in a way.

Now that's helped me be a good person, good player, and it's going to continue to help me. As long as I stay true to that and don't forget those things and keep that perspective, it'll help me be a good player.

I'm just excited to try to embark on that and run with this new challenge.

Q. Dillon, you went to the combine last year and decided to go back to Weber. What did that year do for you, full circle, to get drafted in the first round?

DILLON JONES: It did a lot. You grow up wanting to play in the NBA. That's your goal for forever. For me that was the closest I ever had been at the combine last year. I was in the jersey with the logos on it, I was doing workouts, and it was everything you wish for.

I turned it down, and at the time it was like the toughest thing I've ever done, but I think talking to my brother and things like that, just the person I was, I knew what it would do for me -- I would do anything it took to get back in that situation.

I think that was the most important part. My brother told me something that really made my decision last year. He was just like, you can probably run up and down the court and be in the NBA and just say you're in it, but like what does that do for you?

Your goal shouldn't be to make it. He kind of switched my perspective as I was going through it. He's like, your goal should not be to make it, it should be to stay. I think going back to school and learning another year and igniting that fire of me looking my dreams in my face and then having to take the step back and do what was best for me, it just created a different person. I don't know how else to put it.

I think that's the biggest thing it did for me, and I think it just worked out how it was supposed to.

Q. Dillon, can you tell us a little bit about how you see your game fitting with this group? You have a pretty unusual game for a player your size.

DILLON JONES: You know, for me, it's just about learning from the coaches, being in a situation, and just doing whatever they need me to do. That's how I fit. It's that simple.

Watching them, they play an unorthodox style in a lot of ways. For me as a player that's an unorthodox player, I guess that fits like a hand in a glove. Whatever they need me to do, I'll be ready to do it, and I'll be ready.

Q. Ajay, this team has that lot of success recently with second-round picks, undrafted guys, and them finding success in the NBA. I wonder how much confidence that gives you that this is the place that you landed with a team that has that much success.

AJAY MITCHELL: I'm really excited. I think this team has done it before with players in my position, so really excited to be in this position, and being able to be in this organization is a blessing for me.

It's all about just working hard, doing my part, and being ready at any time. I'm really excited to be in this position.

Q. I feel like maybe Thunder fans aren't super familiar with a lot of your games. What's one thing about it, you as a player, that you think will really stand out to fans?

NIKOLA TOPIC: For me, I just play hard, give my 150 percent for every ball, every possession, every defense, and just do my best to win.

DILLON JONES: I think my toughness and my ability to just go through anything. The things that seem hard for people that don't want to do those things, those are the things I love to do. Whatever that may be, that's just kind of how I would describe myself.

AJAY MITCHELL: I would say just competitiveness, both ends of the floor, fighting for every ball, and then just using my IQ on both ends, too, and making the right plays, smart plays.

Q. Sam, you've talked about how height doesn't necessarily depict defense and effectiveness does. How do you think that Dillon ranges defensively and scales up on that area?

SAM PRESTI: Well, he's a unique player, obviously, to be able to do a lot of things that he does. But one of the things about him is he's 6'6", he has a 6'11" wingspan, and that's helped him become an elite rebounder for consecutive years in college. He has a physicality to his game.

Again, I think the way to look at all of the additions to the team are not just to look at them in singularity and as individuals because that's not how a team works.

You really have to look at what we're adding to the existing team and how that layers and interacts and can counterbalance a lot of different things.

Having someone with that size and length, and I think one of the common themes are all three of the guys that are sitting here, and we talked about this after the draft, is they really think the game. They have good anticipation skills. They process things quickly. That's the reason they've gotten to this point.

You combine that with some of the physical traits I described with Dillon, and it's definitely part of why he's been so good on the boards and the ability to make decisions with his height, as well. That would be the case with the other guys, as well.

Q. Ajay, obviously you're super impressive with the ball in your hands; navigate pick-and-roll very well. You've talked about your IQ. Also a good three-point shooter. I think 75 to 80 percent of your made threes in college were assisted on, which would lend to believe you can play off ball, as well, in the NBA. Can you talk about how you think you would fit in both guard positions at this level?

AJAY MITCHELL: Yeah, I think for me it'll be really interesting and really fun. I think being able to be on the ball but also off the ball. I think especially coming into the NBA, you're going to be a lot off the ball as a young guy, and being able to make the best decisions off the ball, being able to read defenses off the ball is going to be really important for me, and really excited to see how that goes. It's going to be fun.

Q. Sam, could you talk a little bit about the efforts to get the last two guys sitting at the table? You made some deals, packaged some stuff. Just the desire to get in those spots to get those two guys.

SAM PRESTI: Sure. Throughout time here, we've always done everything we can to move up the draft. That's something we've done every year. If we're picking 12, we try to get to 11, we try to get to 10. If we're picking -- in some cases we didn't have picks. We're trying to get in the draft and then seeing if we can work our way up just because we really try to follow the board the best that we can.

With respect to this particular year, we have such a talented group of people that work -- that I have the privilege of working with, that are very creative and very thoughtful. There's like 10 people that go into the decisions to get into these positions to select the players,

and you have a group of people that I heavily rely on that are focused on personnel.

So you kind of take all these different skills and talents, combine them together, and you kind of get a bit of a strategy as to how we do that.

In this case we were successful both times. There have been a lot of times we've tried and haven't been successful. But these situations worked out for us. The players that we wanted were there. I'm really excited about it.

But philosophically we're always trying to maneuver and move ourselves up there, and some years are different than others.

Q. Nikola, you mentioned with Chet, sort of some of the encouragement that he's been through a similar situation. Have you had the chance to talk to him or Nick Collison who used to play here who's part of the organization who went through something like that, as well?

NIKOLA TOPIC: Not yet, but I'm sure in the next few days I'll be able to talk to them both.

SAM PRESTI: Chet is actually coming back when we begin Summer League practice. He's going to be in for some of that, so I think those guys are going to have a chance to spend some time together at that point in time.

As I said earlier, there's so many things that I think can be helpful during this upcoming year for Nikola that will make him a better player, and also just being around the team is going to be a big thing for him because it's going to be a big adjustment.

Getting those things in place, getting comfortable in the environment -- obviously it's a big transition just culturally. That's going to be massive. Then we'll have an opportunity to work on a lot of different things that we wouldn't be able to if he was in season.

We're going to really attack that. We have a little bit of a roadmap. We have some people that, as you mentioned, have experience with that. I think he'll be in great hands.

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