

# Oklahoma City Thunder Media Conference

Monday, September 30, 2024  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

## Alex Caruso Press Conference

**Q. Alex, Sam Presti said last week and said they dropped the ball and they let you go the first time. Do you remind him of that?**

ALEX CARUSO: I don't remind him of that. It might have worked out for the best because it allowed me to move on and grow in ways that maybe I wasn't able to or wouldn't have been able to if I was here. Definitely you brought me back, so I won't give him any stick for that. I was able to grow and get to a place where I am now and come back. I'm better than I was when we were here the first time, so I'm excited to see what's next.

**Q. You are coming off one of your best seasons of your career. What do you bring to this team, obviously one of the best defensive teams in the league? Now adding I-Hart and having all the defenders, where do you feel like you can bring in immediately?**

ALEX CARUSO: I think what comes naturally for me is playing defense. That's how I had to make my name in the league and that's how I had to earn minutes. It was always about improvement, and I went from stealing minutes as a two-way to being All Defensive Team. That was just about being competitive and trying to be a better version of myself.

I think just teaching the guys whatever I have knowledge-wise that I've learned from older players, older coaches and then being vocal. That's something that comes naturally and pretty easily to me is to talk. I learned from some of the greats in Bron and Rondo. Just how to run the game and manage the game without having the ball in your hands.

So to be able to pass that along, hopefully that's something that they'll receive well, which I'm sure they will getting to know them for a couple of weeks. They all just want to get better. So I think adding that to them would be a big benefit.

**Q. You're joining a team that was pretty good defensively a year ago. What's your best guess of just**



**what the defensive signature of this team could be?**

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah. It's going to be as good as we want to make it. That's defense in the NBA specifically, but defense in general in basketball. Whatever the effort is you put into it is what you get in return. They put a lot of effort into it last year, and that's something that me and myself I put a lot of effort into that side of the ball. I think it's going to be a good addition. Obviously me and Hartenstein.

But you have to go out there and earn it. That's defense in the NBA. If you don't go out and play your best, anybody is capable of getting 30, 40, teams scoring 130. It's just about showing up and doing it every night.

**Q. You have been on several teams now. In your experience what's the most challenging part of integrating into a roster and an entire new culture?**

ALEX CARUSO: I think it's just getting over the hump of being new, learning the terminology, learning how they function. I think I'll do a fine job. A lot of my career has been about assimilating into new teams and new cultures, playing with different players, whether it was G League, Elite Camp, or free agent workout, to play in Summer League a couple of times.

I've gotten pretty good at getting to know people on the short timeline and making it work. That's something that I think that I can do here.

**Q. You have been on teams with expectations and been on teams with fewer expectations. (Indiscernible.)**

ALEX CARUSO: I'm excited to be a part of a group of hungry individuals. I feel like all these guys -- even with some of them reaching such success at a young age, they're all very hungry and really, like, excited to get back and play basketball again this year. That's something for me that I love because that's what I'm about. Every year I'm trying to get better. I want more. I want to do more.

As far as expectations, it kind of goes back to the question earlier. It's, like, it's the NBA. Everyone starts 0-0 at the beginning of the year, and everyone thinks that they could win a championship or reach the playoffs, whatever it is,



that big trophy for that team at the end of the year.

You have to show up and play the games. The ball goes up in the air. It's 40 minutes, 82 times. Whatever you do will write the stories. I'm excited to add on to whatever they did in the past, but obviously we have to go out and do it again. There's no hand-outs.

**Q. You said that Shai was the first one to text you. What are your early impressions of the kind of leader Shai is?**

ALEX CARUSO: Incredibly humble guy for how big of a personality he is with the NBA world as far as the skill level and the accolades, accomplishments that he's achieved. He is serving leadership. That's hard to come by in the NBA. Everyone in the NBA is always -- rightfully so, right? It's a dog eat dog world. Everyone is trying to get to the next contract. Everyone is trying to get to the next achievement.

For him to do that, and I think it's not -- I don't think it's a front either. I think that's who he truly is. That's what's been echoed through the organization. I'm excited to get to know him even better and learn from him because the things I've seen earlier are really positive.

**Q. Speaking of Shai, I asked him earlier what makes you a hard defender to go up against? In reverse to that, what makes Shai the dominant player that he is? I know a lot of players talk about the bump that he has and getting around and getting to his spots, but guarding him in the past few years, what has made him such a tough guard and for him to become one of the best players in the league so far?**

ALEX CARUSO: He doesn't have many -- or any deficiencies. He's strong going left, strong going right. Counters going left and right. He gets to the free-throw line. Can shoot threes off the dribble. Catch and shoot, like, play in transition.

There's all these boxes that you ask great scorers and great players to do. He checks all of them. He's one of those guys when you go into it that night, you get a good night's sleep the night before, and you make sure that you do your scouting report. You make sure that the team understands, you're going to need help. It's not a one-on-one. You're not going to just stop him.

But I'm glad to be on his team and not have to go against him.

**Q. You mentioned the defensive guys you've played in this team. (Indiscernible.) You won a championship in**

**L.A. with those veterans. (Indiscernible) Can this team -- I know you haven't practiced yet -- can they get to that level in terms of being defensively on the perimeter like those guys?**

ALEX CARUSO: Yeah I think to be able to do it at a young age in the NBA is so impressive. Even Cason Wallace, the dude came in at 19. I think he was 19 or 20 last year, and he acted like he had played three or four, five years already. Some of the names you said, you know, those guys played a decade plus years in the league.

To put those expectation on those guys is a tough comparison, but I think based on the trajectory and the way I've seen them work in a three-week span, if that's who they truly are, as competitive as they are, I think they can achieve whatever they set their minds to because they're extremely talented individuals. Competitive and work hard.

Those are the three things you need to be an elite defender in the league, and they're off to a great start.

**Q. What do you see from Cason specifically?**

ALEX CARUSO: He's got great instincts. Like I said, coming in at such a young age -- at his age I was going into my junior year or sophomore year of college trying to figure out how I was going to stop guys at Mississippi State, Kentucky, and he was in the NBA guarding all pro, tenured veterans.

To start the confidence and the amnesia you have to have to be a good defender in the NBA and forget about the last play and move on to the next is really impressive. Then, like I said, his instincts. He has a knack for finding the ball, rangy, athletic. He moves side to side really well.

I think once he figures out the game, like once everybody -- that's what they say -- once you figure out the game, your natural talent can meet that, that's when you really start playing. I think he was playing a lot off instinct and a lot off just feel for the game last year. Once he gets a couple more years under his belt, it's going to be really scary.

**Q. I think the last time you were here was Thunder media day was right after you finished at A&M. Most people knew you for that A&M game in this building. I know you've played a lot of big games since then, but rewind to that game for a second. What do you remember of that time and that game for A&M?**

ALEX CARUSO: Well, for anybody that doesn't know, the second round game against Northern Iowa, right, down 12 with 44 seconds. Went into double overtime.

Yeah, I remember being really desperate because I was a senior, and if we lose that, my season is over, and growing up, College Station, A&M was my dream. That was -- at one point in time that was my NBA. That was all I could think about was playing for them.

I was really desperate to just try and make plays. Fortunately, we got a couple of good bounces and got some plays down late. Yeah, that's still one of the questions that gets brought up very, very frequently when I see random people, either A&M fans or just people that just remember basketball.

**Q. Does that still rank as one of your favorite games?**

ALEX CARUSO: For sure. No, for sure. That's up there for sure.

**Q. Speaking about Thunder fans, what can they expect from you on court, and also does it feel weird to be the oldest guy on the team?**

ALEX CARUSO: Yes, to the second one. J-Will has done a good job of calling me old guy already or old man. I like to remind him I'm only 30. I'm not -- I'm going on year eight in the league. I'm 30. Like, I'm not far from when I started, and I'm very far from being done.

Sorry. Repeat the first part of your question. I got distracted.

**Q. (Indiscernible.)**

ALEX CARUSO: I'm not going to change my game. I'm not going to change anything that got me to this point. I'm going to try and be a great addition to the team, play great defense, play smart offense.

Obviously I kind of wear my heart on my sleeve and go for it every night. That's kind of just what I have to do to be impactful in the league, and that's something that I continue or I will continue to do. Play to win, play for the team.

Those are the things that I've held true to myself throughout my whole career, whether I've been in the G League, on two-way, on championship teams. Those things work for me, and they usually work for the team. So hopefully I can just stay with that and provide positive additions to the team.

**Q. (Indiscernible.)**

ALEX CARUSO: A lot of what I just said. They brought me here to do what I do best, which is help the team play

good defense, be a pro, sacrifice for the team. Those are things that they recognized when I was here the first time, which is why you are here.

Sam talked about being regretful that they let me go, and I think coming back that's the same things that they want from me.

I know how to play basketball. I've played around some of the best coaches and players that have played this game. The smartest guys. It's not a science that I don't have figured out. It's just about figuring out how to I can be best beneficial to the team and how I can work with those guys that have already been here.

**Q. (Indiscernible.) Reuniting with Mark, what have you seen up until now? How has the game changed from back then?**

ALEX CARUSO: I start smiling and laughing thinking about it because we have such a good relationship. We've still, like, over the years grabbed dinner together when I've been -- when he's on the road visiting me or I'm here visiting him.

He's still pretty much the same. He's grown as a basketball mind obviously to get to the level and coach the team to the success that they've reached. He's grown in that aspect, but no ego, no pride.

He's willing to say, I'm wrong or something is better and go with it. I feel like that's a big reason and a very impactful reason that he's had success, but also the team has had success is he is willing to strip himself of any achievement or anything that somebody else might deem as positive and just put the team first, put the organization first.

I really respect that about him because he's always been like that even if he was with the Blue and myself. He's always about helping the players and helping the team and really just happy to be back with him and get to grow some more.

**Q. You are the oldest guy on the team. You have this wealth of experience coming in. As a young team that also has some guys that have been established, what's the leadership balance for you with bringing that experience and wanting to share it but also not wanting to insert yourself in a place where you haven't already been?**

ALEX CARUSO: There's no agenda for me to come in and try to have this oldest guy on the team, veteran status. Like I said, I've always been and always will be a team-first guy. That's just engrained in me. I can't change that about



myself even if I wanted to.

So for me it's just about providing resources to the guys that need them. Roller coaster of a year. You go through winning streaks, lose a couple of games you maybe shouldn't. Just trying to keep guys level-headed.

If anybody needs me for anything, they can always ask me, but I don't come in and try to be the boss or do anything crazy. It's just about playing basketball and getting to know my teammates.

**Q. What do you remember about those days with the Blue? Besides the relationship with Mark, what was that experience like?**

ALEX CARUSO: It was a good learning experience for me just figuring out what professional basketball was. In college I was impromptu point guard, and every time in college I would look over to the sideline and get a play, dribble it up, call whatever it was, get people set up. Once you get to the professional game, at least over in this part of the world, it's play fast. If you have an advantage, take it. It was a lot more, like, organized open gym.

So I had to figure out -- I had to figure out how to play the game, and also I had to figure out how could I have an impact in the game because I knew if I had impact in the game, it creates value, and if I have value, someone is going to want me on their team.

So at that point it was just about trying to improve and get better and then figure it out. I think playing a whole year in the G League and then doing free agent workouts, playing on a Summer League team. Again, it was all just great learning experiences for me.

Then, obviously, to the next level and the next level, I just kept learning and getting better and using it. That's something I'm going to continue to do now that I'm here.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports