

Washington Wizards Media Conference

Monday, April 14, 2025

Washington, DC, USA

Coach Brian Keefe

Media Conference



Q. Brian, how would you sum up this season? What strides do you think you guys made specifically on defense?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think we learned a lot about ourselves as an organization, as a team. We had some tough moments. We can't run from some of those things.

But I think what we really developed was a resilient, competitive group who got better throughout the year and really played their best basketball at the end, which is our goal the whole time.

Defensively, we made a huge jump after the All-Star break. I think we ended up being 19th after the All-Star break. Some of that was some outlier scoring games from some opponents. We're probably more in the middle-of-the-pack range.

I was pleased at how we ended the year on the defensive end, for sure. Realizing we still have a lot of room to go, but we finished it in a way that I wanted us to. Credit to the guys for that.

Q. What were your impressions of the rookies? What do you hope they improve on this off-season?

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, obviously was impressed with them from the get-go. This goes back to when we first got them in the gym for Summer League practices last year. Their work throughout the off-season, then getting experience during games.

I think we had a group that played over 2,000 more minutes than any other rookies combined. Ended up getting close to 6,000 minutes on the court, which I think they took full advantage of that time to get better. You saw the growth from month to month, week to week.

Like, the team, all of them were playing their best basketball at the end. I think that builds something for us to continue to improve on going into the off-season.

They weren't perfect. No one ever is. But I liked how they worked. I liked how they prepared. I think those are the things that you guys have heard me say a lot here, that leads to being a consistent player.

The drive, the preparation, the unseen work that no one sees, like the stuff that really makes you consistent, those guys were phenomenal.

Q. First full season as head coach. Any lessons learned as far as your personal develop as a head coach?

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, I think you're always learning and growing. If I'm going to ask my guys to get better and the team to get better, I think you always got to be self-reflective on yourself. I think me and my staff have done that. We looked at ourselves first, how can we help the group. I'm probably not going to get into too many specifics because I don't like talking about myself too much, as you guys know.

First full season, obviously took over halfway through the year last year. I just liked how our team grew. I grew with the team, too. We're in this together. So I had some growing moments for myself.

I think that was part of my own process, that we're in this together, this isn't about me being at the top. No, we're in this as a group. That's what I liked, is we really came together as a group, me, myself, the staff, the support staff, the organization. I liked how we finished our year.

Q. Over the last off-season, it was a big point of emphasis to increase the team's competitiveness. Everybody said the last year is not where you wanted it to be. This year, I'm curious about the team's competitive over 82 games.

BRIAN KEEFE: We had some tough moments at the beginning of the year. To me, it's about what we did really since February 1st, and really what we did after, post All-Star break. I think we were 9-19 after the All-Star break

and 8-4 in close games.

Playing a style that we could identify how we wanted to play. I think we had 7 of our 13 games of the last 20 or 30 games were 30-plus assists, which were 6-1 on those games. Obviously the defensive effort. We're 8-4 in clutch games.

We started to identify a way we were trying to build the play. To be honest, I don't think we got that unless we had gone through some of our struggles early in the year. People don't talk about the resiliency of our group. We have a really resilient group that had to go through the fire together.

I think that led us to being more consistent. Obviously the addition of some veterans, too, to the team, those guys deserve some credit. I think it was a combination of both those things: the resiliency of the group that was here, then the combination of the veterans that came in. I think that's what made us feel good about where we are.

We're not where we want to be, but I think it's a good starting point as we look to really make an imprint this off-season.

Q. Bilal specifically, unfortunately his year ended early, but what do you think about his progression this year?

BRIAN KEEFE: I thought it was good. I think he will be critical of himself, because that's the type of kid he is, and he probably wants more. Quite disappointed that he got injured.

But you could see him, just like the rest of the team, what he was becoming, especially late in the year. Really that last game he played against Toronto, you could feel his imprint on the game. Imposing his will on both ends. We were starting to see this versatile two-way player that can be an offensive creator, which that was an exploration for him this year. I think he really improved in that area.

We've talked about the defense quite a bit. But I think him getting the confidence to realize how special he can be there, how much impact he can have on winning by the stuff that he does.

I know he's excited to tackle this off-season and keep getting better. But I liked where he ended.

Q. With Bilal, do you expect him to continue in an on-ball role moving forward?

BRIAN KEEFE: For sure, yeah. I think that's the best

version of himself, is he's a creator, a guy who can attack, who can get in the rim, generate free throw attempts, put pressure on the defense, make plays. He's a guy who can do a little bit of everything. He's not there yet, but I like the direction he's going.

Q. With some of the struggles he had on the ball, how much of that was just the shooting struggles having a downstream effect?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think it's like we talked about this with quarterbacks. It's reps under center. He needed the reps of these things. These are important things to develop. We want to be good long-term. We weren't going to just want to maybe sacrifice a win in the middle of the season. We want to make sure this is something sustainable.

We believe Bilal at his maximum peak, he had to go through some of this. I think that's what he did this year, is he learned by the experience of doing well, doing bad, how do you respond to that stuff.

I liked how he finished.

Q. You talked about the resiliency your team showed. What were the moments where you saw that tested the most?

BRIAN KEEFE: Obviously we had some tough losing streaks. We can't run from those. No one wants those things to happen, especially the team, me, the organization.

But the one thing that I am really proud of this group is that if you were to walk in that gym every day, there was an energy level, a thirst to get better, want to be coached. I'm really proud of the group for that. I think that's what really led us to building this last part of the year. It was in those tougher moments when we bonded together and didn't break that kind of led to where we are now.

Those are tough things. Sometimes that can break teams. That did not break us all.

Q. Will said before the season that you guys were laying the foundation. You talked about how you started establishing a way of how you guys wanted to do things. As much as you want to elaborate, what is that way? What did you see established by that way this season?

BRIAN KEEFE: It's getting lost in the work, getting lost in the process, to developing guys who want to get to the maximum of their ability and test themselves on a day-to-day basis to create structures for them to be the



best version.

I've said this: that's what leads to consistency in this league. I think we've established quite a bit of that here, but also being humble enough to realize we have a lot of work to do. We're not afraid of that, not afraid to admit where we are.

I think we have established the habits of a team that can get to where we want to go.

Q. You were just talking about the resiliency of the players that are already here as far as the post All-Star Game productions, but also the veterans coming in. What specifically about Khris and Marcus that didn't have with their on-the-court production helped grow the team?

BRIAN KEEFE: You got to give those guys a lot of credit. Those guys have won at the highest level, both of them. They're coming into a situation where they get traded. That's really a hard thing to do. You're getting separated from families and things like that. Guys who have been in winning situations and might have a perception of what the experience is here.

What I'm really grateful for is that they put their feet where they were and fully planted themselves here and were open and embraced what we were doing.

By them doing that, just their natural characteristics as players showed, then their characteristics as leaders showed. We have a group that was really open to them, younger guys who were really curious, really want to get better. They were open to those things because they were fully present.

I'm really grateful for that because those are difficult situations that don't always work out when you get traded. Those guys were fully present here and wanted to be part of something unique. They really contributed to that.

Q. How difficult is it to evaluate young players when for most of the season they've been playing alongside each other?

BRIAN KEEFE: That's a good question.

There were some learning moments for that, for sure, because the one thing I think is unique is that they are going through that together, that they are going through some things that are uncomfortable, that are tough, that are going to test their mindset.

We had three guys come in as rookies this year. Bilal was

a second-year player. We added AJ, who was a first-year player. They got to go through some things together that are going to form some toughness and some mental strength that they'll remember. I think those things are going to serve us really well going forward.

I think the way in terms of the evaluation is that you see how they respond in these moments and how they respond together. I was really pleased with that.

Q. At what stage of the whole building process will you guys know whether any of the young players truly drive winning as opposed to being simply good rotation players?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think that's probably more of a question for Will and Michael probably. My focus is helping them get there, help build the things that are going to turn 'em into those type of guys.

My mindset is already into how do we do that. I think we're doing that. We do that every day. Now we're turning the page into preparation for how we can help improve. So those are the things I think about.

Q. Question about Alex Sarr. How do you qualify his season? What do you think he has to focus on next season especially?

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, I was really proud of Alex, what he did this year. Playing the five in the NBA, that and point guard are maybe the two hardest positions. You are involved in almost every action offensively, defensively. There is almost no resting.

For someone who as a 19-year-old, has not turned 20 yet, I tell you he handled himself really well. How he progressed from month to month, week to week, how he worked, then his production. He had obviously some unique stats in terms of blocks, threes, assists.

He has a very versatile game that we're still learning about. I'm putting him in pick and rolls as a center late in the year because he's capable of doing that. I'm not gifting him that. He's actually capable of doing some of those things.

He's not where he's going to be yet, but we're really pleased with his development this year. We're really pleased about how he attacked the year in terms of his work. Really love his versatility on both sides of the ball, being able to protect the rim and guard on the perimeter. Offensively, he's a play-maker. Can run offense through him. Obviously you can see some of the shooting, too, at times.

Lots of work to do, but a good first year.

Q. A question about how do you mentally help your young players to go through a 16-game losing streak in the middle of the season. I can imagine a player coming from universities, most of the time able to win most of their games, facing this kind of situation might be tough. How do you help them as a coach?

BRIAN KEEFE: First, we're really lucky that Will, Michael and the staff did a great job of drafting and acquiring high-character guys, guys who love the game. Players help coaches just as much as coaches help players.

As I said, we have a group that's really eager to improve. Even when we were going through our struggles, when we walked in the gym, we had guys who were ready to get better, ready to improve, that weren't looking to wallow in something that happened. They wanted to move forward.

They gave us energy. I have the staff, I think we assembled a really good staff I was really pleased with this year, that thinks the same way. Focused on the process, really teachers and coaches, that's my nature at heart, too. We're about the work and about the gym. I think that we all found that in common with our players and our staff.

Q. How do you sum up Bub's season?

BRIAN KEEFE: Really pleased. I started him from day one. There was a reason I started him from day one, because of his personality, his competitiveness, his joy for the game. I really felt like we needed that as an organization from the get-go. He's out there guarding Jrue Holiday on the first night, almost getting in confrontations with him, which is what you expect a kid from Baltimore to do. That's what we loved about him.

He has an infectious joy, a competitiveness, a work ethic that's contagious. He's still getting better basketball-wise, just like any guy at his age would. Making reads out of the pick and roll. I think all those things really improved tremendously.

A culmination of that last night. To finish the year with a guy we started as a 19-year-old to close out the game last night was very touching and fulfilling for our team and our organization.

Q. How do you kind of handle having so many young guys, this being their first time playing so much, so many games at one time, so many minutes? Did that ever make you nervous? How did you handle that through the course of the season?

BRIAN KEEFE: Didn't make me nervous. I've been around some young players in my career before. I kind of knew what that looks like and what that feels like. I had never concern about any of that because some of the things I answered with your question about their love of the game.

I saw that as soon as we drafted a lot of those guys, acquired some of these guys. You knew right away that these guys want to be in the gym. I thought they handled themselves really well.

Q. A guy like AJ, who didn't play that much before the season in general, how did you evaluate him coming in when he got sent here?

BRIAN KEEFE: We threw him right in the mix. Right away was really impressed with him. He really has no fear. He's got a confidence in himself. Everybody has seen the explosiveness. Also he's got a good feel for the game for a young man.

We were really happy that we were able to acquire him and now get him into our development program. We're really pleased with how he played down the stretch here.

Work in progress, like all of us, the rest of the team. Was really pleased with his ability to produce when he got in the games, and his work behind the scenes.

Q. Can you name any of your top moments from this season, things you're most proud of?

BRIAN KEEFE: You'll have to get back to me on that one. I haven't had enough time to think of that.

Q. Your biggest goals for the off-season?

BRIAN KEEFE: To intentionally get better every day. That's always my goal. That's it. How are we going to do that? You can only tackle one day at a time. We have a lot of time. We want to be playing in these games eventually. We want to use that as motivation.

We can make significant progress, but that can only be done one day at a time.

Q. When you look back at the draft process with these guys and you think of the conversations that you had, whether it was college coaches, professional coaches, guys coming from overseas, you think of where they built themselves over the course of this season, everything that was told to you and Will in those meetings and conversations, how much of that came to fruition or more that you saw from the growth and

development of these young guys?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think the credit of all of that stuff for me is Will and his department, Michael, the ability to find guys who truly love the game, who fit the DNA of the type of people we want here in our building. It was very evident very early who these guys were, their appetite for the game, their curious enthusiasm to get better.

Those things never wavered. That can be hard in this league because the schedule is daunting. We had some tough moments. But credit to those guys, like, for identifying the type of guys that we have. Those guys are terrific.

Q. When you took over officially in the summer, now that you've gotten through the first season, with your experience under different head coaches, different styles, seeing what they go through now that you move those 12 inches, what for you was the not necessarily surprise but the one thing that you didn't realize those 12 inches changes so drastically for an assistant to a head coach that you look back at the course of your first season and say, Never knew that I could have expected that, but I'm glad I went through that experience?

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, I was assistant for a long time. I really value assistants probably because I was one for a long time.

I never felt like I didn't care as much as anybody else did when I was that. I think the one thing is when you're in I guess the chair I am in now is that you just even feel maybe a slightly more responsibility for everybody. I think that's a good thing because I think that shows you that you care, that you want to have the organization go forward.

I think it's just that part. I actually don't mind doing this stuff. Sometimes people say the media stuff is hard. I enjoy all this stuff. This has been fun for me getting to know everybody in this room.

I think it's just you feel that greater responsibility for the team, for the organization. You got people who entrust you, starting with ownership. Michael and Will, we want to help deliver on what we're trying to do.

Q. How do you try to build winning habits in a situation where short-term wins are prioritized?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think we are building winning habits.

Q. How do you do it?

BRIAN KEEFE: It's by the daily work. It's by what you're doing on a day-to-day basis. It's about building resiliency 'cause sometimes you're going to have tough moments. Everybody has tough moments in this league. The best teams in the world have tough moments that you're going to go through. What can you learn from those things?

This league is a tough league. It is a competitive league. It is a ruthless league. The only things you can do are the things that you can control because some things are out of your control.

Those are the things we focus on. I think those things lead you to be consistent. There's a mental toughness that's developed through some of the things that we've gone through. I think you have to go through the fire in this league. There's a lot of tests. I think that those things will build us to be what we think will be sustainable.

That is the ultimate goal. We're not here just to develop; we're here to win. We want to win here for a while. There's no skipping steps to that. This has to be laid brick by brick. If you skip steps, you will fall off very quickly in my belief and our organization's belief.

That's how I think we do it.

Q. With Alex, he still struggled the latter part of the season. What are some of the thing things you want him focusing on over the off-season?

BRIAN KEEFE: Some of that stuff's not surprising. It's very rare for young players in this league, and I've coached Hall of Famers and MVPs, who struggled around the rim early in their career.

It's the speed, length, size, strength stuff that will get better for him as time goes. I wanted the aggressiveness. That's what we saw late. I wasn't worried about the efficiency. We'll worry about that as that time comes. But that stuff will be learned and grown as he improves.

Q. How did you balance for the young players getting them experience, throwing them in the fire, but also having them earn their roles within the team?

BRIAN KEEFE: Well, we had some injuries, first of all, too. We had some guys out early in the year, for sure. But I think a lot of these guys earned their roles because they ended up being some of our better players. I think that culminated with where they were at the end of the year. I think for the most part those guys earned some of it as they came.

Q. When this team is good, what will they lead with?



BRIAN KEEFE: Defense. I think great teams are built on defense. I think we're developing versatile length, size that's going to be able to do that when we get there.

Q. Of this young group, who took to that challenge the quickest or handled the adversity the best?

BRIAN KEEFE: I would say all the younger core guys did great with that. I think Alex, for his versatility, being able to defend and do some stuff that he probably has never been asked for. Bilal, we see that. Bub with his positional size. Probably the one that was most impressive was Kyshawn's development in terms of what he can do on the perimeter. He had some unique stats in terms of blocks, steals for a guy his age that some guys in NBA history have never done.

Credit to the scouting staff for getting versatile guys who are switchable and can do different things defensively. We're not where we want to be, as I've said. We can start seeing the foundation of what that's going to look like.

Q. With Kyshawn specifically, that was not the pre-draft MO on him. I just wonder how that kind of revealed itself over the course of the season.

BRIAN KEEFE: This is a worker. This is a guy who intentionally wants to get better. He deserves the credit, the staff who worked with him. This is a guy who really dove into it.

You guys have asked me about how he's fouling a lot, he's fouling a lot. Well, he was learning as he was going through that. Then he learned how to not do that as much. Now he's getting blocks and steals. There was a lot of film work done with that, a lot of intentionality behind that. A lot of credit for him on that.

Q. I know you most likely have not started thinking about the draft yet. In general as a coach, what qualities really excite you when it comes to up-and-coming NBA players? What qualities do you hope future Wizards will have on and off the floor?

BRIAN KEEFE: I obviously have not thought about that and will not think about that anytime for the next few days.

It's an easy one for me: guys who love the game. Those are the guys that make it. Obviously you got to have some physical characteristics, skill set type of things. For me you always start with the mindset and guys who love to play.

Q. How do you evaluate Kyshawn offensively on that end of the floor as to what he brings?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think you saw the same thing with his defense. You saw maturation as the season grew. Struggled to shoot the ball a little bit early, then slowly but surely that turned into a guy that became a pretty consistent shooter. Had some type of streak going on where he led rookies this year in threes.

The thing that was there from the get-go was his processing and play making. Just has a knack for understanding space, where to be, and where to make the right play.

That stuff was there early. Saw that pretty quickly. I think that just grew more and more. It's just a very winning player he became on both ends.

Q. How much better was Jordan Poole this season overall compared to last season?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think a lot of it was the start of the middle of the year last year. This is his best statistical year of his career in terms of a lot of numbers. But I go to more his leadership was really what impressed me the most. This guy set the season record for threes this year.

This is a guy who I get calls on every night, he's going to go shoot early in the morning. Is that okay, Coach? Yeah, that's great. This is daily. This guy puts in a massive amount of work. He puts massive work into his body.

I don't think people realize, when you have coverages thrown at you that he has to deal with on a night-to-night basis, the type of conditioning, strength work that you have to do to be able to produce like that.

That was a great example for all of our players. Our younger guys gravitated to that. His leadership and his play on the court showed that, too.

Q. Regarding Alex, how do you see, regarding the off-season development, the fact that he might be joining the French national team this summer for the Euro Basketball? Is that positive or might become complicated?

BRIAN KEEFE: No, I always think it's great for guys to play. I've had many guys on my team, some play some European teams, a lot of guys play USA Basketball. I think those are always a great experience.

He got to play in the Olympics last year. Obviously Bilal played in the gold medal game, which is one of the greatest games I've ever seen. Those things shape you. The competitiveness, being in those type of environments,



the pressure. I think it's always a great thing when guys get to represent their countries. That's pretty special.

Q. How much do you personally expect to be on the road visiting guys wherever they are in the off-season?

BRIAN KEEFE: I will be doing that quite a bit. We'll have guys here, too, in town, but I will be out there. I've been doing that a long time. Nothing's going to change with that.

Thanks, guys. Lastly, thank you guys for your patience with me. Really enjoyed getting to know everybody in this room. I meant it. Some people say this is not a fun part of the job for a head coach, but getting to know everybody here, like we're all in this kind of journey together. This NBA is a big, big family. We all have different parts of it. I've really enjoyed everybody this year, getting to know you guys a little bit more. So thank you.

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