

# Washington Wizards Media Conference

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## Michael Winger Media Conference



MICHAEL WINGER: Thank you guys so much for being here. I appreciate it a lot. We're going to try to do an annual state of Monumental Basketball right around this time every year, sometime prior to the Mystics season beginning, somewhere in the middle of the Wizards season, and it'll be an opportunity just to zoom out a little bit and talk about all three teams at the same time.

As you know, we decided as a leadership team that tearing down both organizations to the studs, rebuilding from scratch, designing franchises to thrive in this new era of NBA and WNBA basketball, and leading into a singular identity of player development would be our roadmap to eventual sustained success. We are resolute in this plan. Three seasons into it with the Wizards, one season into it for me with the Mystics, and we're very excited about the gains that we've made with both clubs.

Both teams, Wizards and Mystics, are very different from the ones they were just a few years ago. We have extraordinary talent, lots of youth, high energy, valuable draft assets, cultures rooted in seriousness, competitiveness and joy, and I believe we are just getting started with both teams.

I'm tremendously optimistic about the future for those teams rooted in our people, our principles and our program. A reminder, we are not pursuing short-term success. We are not pursuing moderate success. We believe that mediocrity, frankly, is just easily achievable, but there's a very low ceiling on hope.

We undertook two radical organizational rebuilds. We are also undertaking an equally radical arena transformation project in pursuit of sustainable greatness, and that remains our target.

We have completed the deconstruction phase with the Wizards. We are firmly into building that franchise and organization with the identity that we want. Our players enjoy being here. Our staff is deeply passionate about their contributions to our culture and our growth mindset

environment.

As Trae Young would tell you, he's heard about the work that we're doing, and he wanted to be a part of that, and for that I'm deeply honored, and I'm very proud of our people.

With all of our basketball programs, everything we do is anchored by player development. Player development is not a department for us; it's a way of life. It is how we build an appealing organization, attract talent, and ultimately how we will win.

We study our athletes very closely. We examine the connectivity of our players as teams. We project their development curves and development needs to further enhance their growth.

Because of the very hard work and dedication that our players and staff have exhibited, Alex Sarr is having an All-Star type season in my opinion. He's becoming one of the most dominant big men in the league at the rim on both ends of the floor.

Kyshawn at just 22 years old has already become one of the more well-rounded players in the NBA. He's one of just 16 players in the league with his combination of points, rebounds and assists, and he's the youngest on that list among All-Star company.

Bilal is stepping up to the toughest matchups on the floor every single night. He's only 21. His combination of size, speed, competitiveness and mental fitness allow him to be among the most disruptive defenders in the NBA.

Bub has demonstrated exceptional growth on both ends of the floor with the ball and without, and he's quickly become one of the more reliably elite three-point shooters in the NBA.

Tre Johnson, a rookie, is having an unprecedented start to his NBA career. Not far from the revered 50/40/90 mark, he's shown early signs of development as a play maker and as a defender, which comes as no surprise for those who have seen his work ethic.



All of these athletes embody the Wizards' DNA. These are professionals who bring seriousness, coachability, competitiveness and joy to our gym. They are bound together by winning fiber, and they'll exemplify for every other player that joins our team what it means to be a Wizard. We're very proud of the work we've done organizationally to select and support players that will serve as the bedrock for our winning programs.

I feel strongly that the athletes headlining both the Wizards and the Mystics are exactly the right player to lead these teams into the future when we are contending. They're exceptionally high-character people, remarkable teammates, selfless teammates, hard workers, and they embody the competitive characteristics that will make this community very proud.

Meanwhile, at Ted's direction and with his consistent support, we are effectively rebuilding the arena. We have completely reinvented the Wizards and the Go-Go infrastructure. We are in the process of doing the same with the Mystics right now. He has invested hundreds of millions of dollars into our staff, our arena, our development programs, leveling up the Mystics and the Wizards experience, making functional improvements to our current facility, and he will spend many millions more on a new facility down the line.

He is deeply serious about Washington, D.C., being the home to world-class basketball programs and model franchises for excellence and community pride.

None of this is possible without his vision and his commitment, nor without the support and patience of our fans.

As we embark on the second half of the season with the Wizards, we are paying very close attention to the developmental gains of our young athletes. We are coming upon a time mostly within the next six to 18 months where we have to declare which of our youngest players can make material contributions to our eventual contention and which will make their most meaningful contributions somewhere else.

Unfortunately, there are only so many roster spots and so many minutes on an NBA basketball team, and we need to know what a lot of these guys can do.

For example, take our three two-way players, Tristan, Jamir and Sharife. They're all on expiring two-way contracts, and we have to make decisions on them in June. Malaki is on an expiring contract. We haven't seen much of what AJ can bring. Will Riley hasn't gotten the

opportunities that we would like for him to have, and of course, I sure wish Cam was healthy.

The point is, to make decisions on these players, we need to evaluate these players in game scenarios, and I think that'll be a really important development for us as we head into the second half of the season.

With the Mystics, hopefully there's a resolution to the CBA and we can return to our regularly scheduled programming and assemble our team. We feel strongly that we are in a really great position right now with Sonia and Kiki anchoring our franchise, and we will continue to surround them with high-level athletes to support their growth.

We will try to retain some of our free agents. We will add others. We will see Georgia return to the court this season. We will draft a few inspiring players in April, and then we will further elevate our program.

I have thoroughly enjoyed immersing myself into the Mystics' environment and am beyond grateful to the staff and the athletes who make that organization a delight to watch.

Finally, as Will and I have said and Jamila has said a number of times, we remain focused on the inputs, the incremental gains rather than the results. We believe wholeheartedly that the quality of our inputs over time compounded by player development and strategic roster supplementation will yield the results that we all hope to achieve: Contention.

Meanwhile, we are excited by the fan optimism that we see, the local appreciation for the basketball purity that our young players exhibit, and the subtle identity taking shape with our teams: Professional, hardworking, competitive and joyful. That's a brand of basketball this city can get behind, and it'll be our identity moving forward.

I'm happy to answer questions.

**Q. Specifically with the Wizards, how does the acquisition of Trae raise the profile in the bigger picture and longer term maybe as it pertains to developing the youth on the roster and also maybe making D.C. an attractive landing spot for other players you might be considering?**

MICHAEL WINGER: Trae Young? I thought Will did an amazing job of addressing that a couple weeks ago, but ultimately, Trae Young has a very long track record of making other players around him better, particularly on the offensive end, and for what we are trying to do organizationally, player development remains our identity.

We believe that Trae Young will contribute mightily to our player development program, not only for himself but all of our athletes, and I think guys just have fun playing with him.

By doubling down on joy, we believe very much, whether it's on the strategy team, on the coaching staff, the evaluation team, if you love what you're doing, you're probably going to be very good at what you're doing, and so we want our players to continue to love playing basketball. It's not really an issue for our guys, but I think Trae Young plays a joyful brand of basketball, and I think that that'll be contagious among our athletes.

**Q. Michael, I know this coming draft is very important for the Wizards. However it goes is how it goes. But regardless of how it goes, are you pledging that the tear-down is not only done, but we are now going to make significant additions to the roster besides Trae, besides bringing in Trae, given the incredible amount of cap space that you guys have, that you can bring in maybe multiple players but at least one additional impact player this off-season?**

MICHAEL WINGER: If I'm understanding the question correctly, it's having added Trae Young, are we now in the marketplace to just continuing to add, to pile on elite talent?

**Q. To at least at one more player because he doesn't take up -- you still have a lot of cap space, even with his salary next season.**

MICHAEL WINGER: I think the answer is I don't know. I think that we will remain opportunistic. I think that we will continue to evaluate the marketplace for what's available.

We are not hitting a gas pedal if any sort, if that's sort of inferred in the question. We think acquiring a four-time All-Star in his prime was sort of a hell of an acquisition for us. It has gas pedal implications, but we're not necessarily hitting the gas pedal. Whatever we do with that cap space, it might evaporate in the next two weeks; we just don't know.

But we'll do something creative with that cap space. Could be acquiring a player, could be trading for a player, could be re-signing some of our own players. We're working through all those scenarios right now.

**Q. Let's put it another way. Next season, should there be a jump, should there be an expected jump in terms of the team's not only won-loss record but ambition, getting back towards the Playoffs, getting back**

**towards being a contending team?**

MICHAEL WINGER: I am not personally setting some kind of a barometer on what next season ought to be. My expectation is that particularly with Trae Young on the basketball team and the development of our young players, Alex, Ky, Bilal, Bub, Tre, et cetera, we are going to be better next season than we are this season.

How much better remains to be seen, but I think that we all would expect us to be better and more competitive next season, and Trae by himself will put us in more competitive basketball games than we've been in.

**Q. On the Mystics side of things, with the negotiations ongoing over the CBA, can you take us inside how you, Sydney and Jamila are preparing or what you guys are able to do right now, and does the pause that we're in right now waiting for a new CBA, does that affect your longer term plans or timeline with the Mystics?**

MICHAEL WINGER: Multipart question. I'll see if I can address all parts.

What we do right now is we spend a lot of time pontificating and predicting and projecting and hoping that we can predict what the rules are going to be. But there's a lot of scouting going on right now. Obviously the NCAA season is underway.

Then of course it would be nice if the next CBA is speedy and fair for all parties. That would be a delight. I expect that to happen at some point.

But I can't really predict sort of what it will look like. We're waiting and seeing.

But it's not terribly disruptive because we're on a level playing field with all the other teams who are monitoring the same situation.

**Q. You mentioned development, and you don't have a ton of young players on the roster who aren't free agents to be able to develop right now, so how do you --**

MICHAEL WINGER: You're saying we don't have a lot of players to develop?

**Q. Well, you have some young players still under contract, but a lot of the players around the league and a lot of players who were on the roster last year are free agents, so I'm curious how you continue that spirit of player development this off-season.**

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MICHAEL WINGER: Well, the athletes work out together a lot, sometimes in our building, sometimes elsewhere. They spend a lot of time together. Obviously some of them are playing in other leagues right now. But playing competitive basketball is a huge part of player development. When these athletes go into the off-season, they take with them a really thorough, robust player development program plan from us, and then we stay in regular communication with them, their strength and conditioning coaches, their trainers, et cetera, so we monitor their development.

**Q. You just mentioned free agency. Just about every player in the league that's not on a rookie deal is going to be a free agent. With the foundation that you guys have, Sonia, Kiki, Georgia, a couple other young draft picks coming up, do you see yourself in position to be active in this free agency period when literally just about every veteran in the league is going to be able -- are you going to be available? Are you guys kind of in that part of the process where you would be interested in possibly taking a swing at a more established veteran?**

MICHAEL WINGER: Sure, I think that we have to explore all avenues. I think that we have to explore trades. I think that we have to explore free agency. But at the very end of the day, we are firmly committed to building a team around Sonia and Kiki. Georgia likely, as well, and then we're going to have another high pick in this draft. We'd love to bring back some of the free agents that we have.

I'm sure that Jamila will take a lap around the free agent league to see who would have some interest in coming here. But we aren't necessarily putting all of our eggs in one basket and chasing one or two free agents.

**Q. A quick follow-up, you've talked a lot about the facilities over here, the rebuild and that kind of thing. But where do you see the Mystics in that process as far as they're I believe the second smallest home arena in the league, and across the league people are building new facilities and trying to get into bigger buildings? Where do you see the Mystics fitting in that part as far as facility-wise?**

MICHAEL WINGER: Well, there's a couple things. One, I think that the facility that we have right now for the Mystics is an amazing facility for them. I think that the cohabitation of the Stics and the Wizards is really beneficial for both teams. I think that it just becomes a pure basketball environment.

Then with respect to the arena size, at the conclusion of the CapitalOne transformation, the Mystics are going to be

playing a lot of basketball games here at CapitalOne. I have no concerns about the arena that we play in down in Southeast. In fact, I sort of like the intimate environment quite a bit, when the fans call for it, and then we're going to have 12 or 15 games a year or more here at CapitalOne.

**Q. I know hindsight is 20/20. It's now been 18 months since the team traded Deni. Was that trade a mistake?**

MICHAEL WINGER: No, it was not a mistake. I'm very happy for Deni. We're all very happy for Deni. We saw Deni as a very high-level ascending player. Super happy for him, super happy for the Blazers. We've got a lot of friends there with the Blazers.

But no, because we did it for the reasons we said then, which is to, in effect, take us back a couple years so we could reset the roster and everybody was sort of on the same age curve, and Deni is ahead of that.

**Q. This might just be a clarity question from your opening statement, but do you believe with the Mystics specifically that in year one you guys have been able to lay that foundation to be able to build forward with Kiki and Sonia? Do you believe that phase of what you're trying to build has already been done?**

MICHAEL WINGER: To the extent that I'm interpreting your question as having a clear line of demarcation between one phase and the next, probably not. I think they all sort of blur into the next phase.

The athletes themselves sort of tell us when we're ready to graduate under the next phase by their competitiveness, their ability to carry a team. So the answer is I don't know. I'm really eager to see Georgia play, and I'm really eager to see who we draft in this draft.

I'd like to see who we bring back in free agency. But I couldn't tell you what necessarily phase we're in or if some foundation has been laid. I know culturally the foundation has been laid.

I think that Sonia and Kiki, together with our coaching staff and our front office, I think they represent everything we want the Mystics to be about, so from that perspective I'm extremely, extremely satisfied with where we are.

**Q. A year and a half into Brian Keefe's tenure as the permanent head coach, how do you assess how he's performed, and how do you assess what his future looks like?**

MICHAEL WINGER: I think Brian has done a remarkable job. I think Brian has done everything we've asked him to



do. He's developed young athletes. He's developed a culture of competitiveness, accountability, togetherness and joy. He marches out there every day, coaches these guys on both ends of the floor. He's built an amazing coaching staff. I'm very, very pleased with the job that Brian has done.

**Q. This might be difficult to answer, but with all these players being so young, other than Trae per se, and if this is the group that you see going forward, do you see Trae with this group as being the core to get you up towards contender level, or with Trae to get these guys to a competitive level, to have them start to learn what it takes to win and then figure it out from there?**

MICHAEL WINGER: I don't know that I could accurately project some fandom delta between being competitive and being contenders. We want to be more competitive on the go-forward, and I think that Trae Young helps elevate us into that competitive space.

I think if and when we become contenders, it is going to be a function of how well and how quickly our young players develop, who else we can add to the team over the next handful of years. But Trae Young unequivocally will make us a better basketball team, and he will help us evaluate our players through a more refined lens so that we can understand who will be part of that eventual contending team.

**Q. As far as Trae goes, obviously he's been a multitime All-Star; we've seen what he can do. What do you envision for him whenever he's ready to go as the role within this group as, like, the main guy, facilitator? How do you see him fitting in with this group?**

MICHAEL WINGER: Probably a better question for Will and BK. When I watch our games, I sort of, for better or worse, fall back into fan mode. But I expect him to be a primary ball handler. I expect him to get guys good shots. I expect him to teach, and I don't mean just teach the ball handlers. I expect him to teach everybody on the floor and everybody off the floor how to play basketball at his level.

We're really optimistic with the results that we expect. But he is a four-time All-Star. But he's also not the only highly accomplished athlete on our basketball team. Khris Middleton is a very highly accomplished athlete, as well, and he has had an enormous leadership influence on our players. He's had an enormous on-court impact for our team, and I expect Trae to have a similar impact.

**Q. I wanted to ask about Shakira Austin; she'll be a restricted free agent. We've talked a lot about the**

**youth and setting that foundation with Kiki, Sonia and Georgia. Do you consider her part of that core that you hope to have long-term in the future, or is this kind of a we'll-see-how-the-negotiations-play-out sort of a thing?**

MICHAEL WINGER: Both are true. Yes, I mean, I love Shakira. I foresee her being a part of this team for a long time.

She does have the power of choice. She is a free agent, and she's earned that. So she'll have the opportunity to explore her options. I hope that we are an attractive option for her, and we'll go from there.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about Jamila in a similar vein to the question earlier. She's coming up pretty much on year one of her tenure, and just curious how you've seen her grow in her role and settle in and just kind of what you've thought of year one of what she's done with the Mystics.**

MICHAEL WINGER: Yeah, I think that our roster is a testament to the work that she's done. She's made a lot of trades. She's drafted really, really well. She's assembled a team that I think loves playing together, and I think that they have a lot of versatility that they can lean into going forward.

I know she's working her tail off to scout for this upcoming draft. She has a lot of picks in this draft. But I'm very, very pleased with the job that Jamila has done this first year. In fact, I don't even think it's been a year. But maybe it has.

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