

Washington Wizards Media Conference

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Coach Brian Keefe Media Conference



BRIAN KEEFE: I'll start off first, then I'll let you guys ask some questions after that.

First of all, just want to thank all of you guys in here. I really enjoy the conversations we have, getting to know each one of you personally through the year. But more importantly the investment and commitment and time that you guys put into this to tell our story, about our players, about our organization. That stuff really matters. It matters to our fans. It matters to us. It matters to our organization. I'm really grateful for that.

I always enjoy our conversations, so thank you.

I want to acknowledge my coaching staff, all the support staff, Michael, Will, Ted and the ownership group. When we started this season, we had a plan that we wanted to be committed to, and that was developing our team and building habits. I think we accomplished that. And the support from all those people, I felt that every day. The discipline, the everyday execution of that mattered. The support, our organization grew because of that.

Now let's talk a little bit about the season.

We're competitors here. No one wants to lose. We're not happy about any of that. But there are some things that I am specifically pleased about. The organizational culture that we developed on an everyday basis, the environment that we built. That stuff really matters. That takes a lot of intention and it takes a lot of discipline and it takes a lot of collaboration.

I'm really proud of how we as an organization did all that this year. That stuff matters. That stuff is going to build us into what we think is going to be the most importantly a consistent winner, which has been the message and goal all along.

Also talked about at the beginning of the season that this was going to be a season of development and opportunity. That is something that we really focused on all the way up

to game 82. I remember probably in my opening press conference we had a roster of I believe eight or nine guys under the age of 21 years of age. That was going to naturally lead to some opportunity and development. I think we had that. Four guys playing the Rising Stars game, seven over the last two years. You saw some guys make some big jumps statistically. You can look at Kyshawn and Alex almost statistically improved in every stat that they had and made huge jumps in efficiency this year.

Talk about Bub, his consistency. The guy is an Ironman. What he did in terms of his improvement, his three-point shooting, assists. I think he has some stat that's like third in NBA history for 21 and under with assists and threes.

Tre Johnson, adding him into the mix. What he did efficiency-wise from the three-point line is very hard to do as a first-year player. I've seen that for many years. Most guys did not do what he was able to do. He was rewarded by playing in the Rising Star game.

Then you can talk about the guys that developed at the later part of the year. Will Riley made a huge jump. You can see from each month what he did, how he got better, then how he finished the year. His efficiency kept growing.

Jamir Watkins, that's a great success story of our collaboration with our Go-Go, really one organization, as we talk about. Those guys spent time with them. Cody and his staff did a great job preparing for them when their opportunity arises.

I think those are the successes. I could probably go more on about players and some stats. That stuff mattered because what we're trying to do is build something that's consistent. Individually we had a lot of success stories.

Collectively we had to make that jump as a group, and we know that. We're not afraid of that. But we're laying the foundation. This is what this year was about, laying the foundation for how we work every day, in everything that we do. We've always said that we think that is the most important thing that's going to lead us to be a consistent

winner, and that I'm really grateful for our players and the commitment that they had for that this year.

With that I'll let you guys open up and ask some questions.

Q. Brian, Alex Sarr didn't just improve, he changed the way he played quite a bit. Now that the season is over, how did that transpire? How did the conversations go?

BRIAN KEEFE: Credit goes to him. I think these things started probably even last year at this time. He wanted to find ways to be more efficient. He did that by attacking the rim this year. You saw a really intentional, purposeful drive for him to do that, A, by changing his body, by working with our coaching staff, but his commitment to do that. You saw his efficiency rise by his shot diet changed: less threes, more rim, more attacking, more free throws. He still was second in the NBA in blocks.

So let's talk about the most important thing, is still his defense. But he changes trajectory of how he played by his commitment in the off-season. A lot of credit to him for being able to change that, the time he put into doing that.

Q. You mentioned this group will have to find a way to collectively start to play in a more team-oriented concept to get the results that you hoped for next season. Why do you feel this group can make that adjustment and take that next step?

BRIAN KEEFE: 'Cause there were traces of it this year. For a good two-month stretch, starting in mid-December almost through mid February, we showed a lot of growth. Obviously we had some injuries and the trades happened, availability of the players changed. We saw a consistency with a lot of young players on the court, with a lot of growth, that is what winning basketball could look like.

I have faith in our guys. I have trust in the stuff that they have done, the trust in the work they have put in. But we have more work to do. You saw examples of it this year.

Q. There is a lot of external commentary about what was happening here in DC with coaching, et cetera. What mechanisms were put in place to block out of the proverbial noise, and what does it say about the players and you guys that they butt into it?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think our organization does a good job of focusing at the task at hand. What's that? The most important thing is building habits, the process. We've been that way since we've been here, very intentional about what we're doing. I know you guys ask me questions that focus on things three games from now. I'm always like, We

have a game today, a shootaround today, a practice today.

I don't think we've ever wavered from that. I think that stuff's going to really pay off for us. That's how we do it. We stick to what we stick to. That's the work. The work is not small. That's a big deal. That's a big deal in this league. That's something I'm really proud of our group for.

Q. I talked to AG a few weeks ago. When I asked you what makes you different as a coach, you highlighted your developmental touch. How do you feel like you have improved or changed as a coach over this season? How does that differ from past staffs?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think you're always growing. We challenge our players to grow. If I don't challenge myself to do that, then I'm a hypocrite myself.

I think we're all in this together. I'm probably not going to get into certain specifics. I think that's the one thing about this organization, is that we're always looking for ways to improve from top to bottom, from ownership to Michael and Will to myself. I think those are daily conversations we're always having.

I think that stuff leads to a really healthy growth mindset, which I think we really have here. So I'm always a work in progress, just like anybody else is, just like you guys all are, too. We always have to get better.

I think that this year was an example of that, that there was some improvement. Obviously I'm part of that, too.

Q. A few players will play with the national team this summer. Do you keep up with international basketball, overseas basketball? Do you find maybe inspiration from it?

BRIAN KEEFE: I've always been a big believer, we have a lot of guys, I'm sure you're talking about Alex and Bilal, they played for their national teams. Kyshawn played for Canada. Tristan played for Serbia. Now Anthony obviously has played for Team USA.

I think those experiences are tremendous. I've had a lot of guys that I've coached over the years that have made big jumps in their career because they are playing under pressure. Playing for your country is obviously a big deal. I have great respect for when our guys get to do that.

I got to go visit those guys, be a part of that, be around that. You can always learn from that, too. I always like watching international games because a lot of the trends you can have from there come to us, too. You're always trying to steal ideas.

I think it's great when our guys go play for their teams. I'm sure we're going to have some of our guys doing that this summer. I'm looking forward to attending.

Q. Can you name any specific habits that young guys like Kyshawn or Bilal learned this season that will help this team win more in the future?

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, I think that's a great question. I think for guys like Kyshawn and Bilal, who are entering year two and three, I think they just became more consistent. Kyshawn became more efficient this year. We were putting the ball in his hands a lot more, and he still became more efficient. Statistically he improved in almost every category. I think his field goal percentage went up like almost several percent, overall like 6 percent in three-point field goal. That's hard to do with having the ball in his hands a lot and having to guard.

Bilal, I probably forgot to mention him earlier. He didn't ever get the first year is the last 25 games of the year. He needed that this year. You saw his development the last part, his numbers post All-Star break went really high. We talked about he was a little bit in and out in the lineup. That time was really important for him. I was really pleased that he got that last part of the year to really grow.

Q. A lot of times in the league people say it's very difficult to go from being one of the worst teams by record to a team that's a Playoff contender. For example, A.D. and Draymond Green said the same on Draymond's podcast last week. How tough will it be to unwind the expectation of losing at the start of next year?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think that's what the off-season is for. I think we're obviously debriefing a little bit on what we just finished up with this year. We'll quickly pivot into our off-season mode, how we're going to position our team to be successful.

It really doesn't change that much on how we do that. There's no skipping steps. We have to take advantage of each day to improve ourselves individually and collectively. I think that we're built to do that because those are the habits we've ingrained into our organization, not just for our players, but for our staff, how we operate here.

It's a great challenge but something we all look forward to.

Q. How exactly have you grown over the last two years as a coach?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think when you first start, I'm trying to

implement things. I started as the interim. We're doing things a little bit on the fly the first year.

I think a lot of it was staff continuity. I've got a terrific coaching staff that has really learned to work well together, me delegating a little bit more. We had some additions with the cap program this year. All these things that helped me to be able to focus on different things, take a little bit more of a bird's eye view at times. Our staff is now all up to speed on continuity, language, speaking the same things, teaching the same things. I think that was a big help for me.

I think, too, I thought we did much better here in the end-of-game situations. We had a good stretch here where I think we were in that stretch where we were playing some pretty good basketball. I think we were one of the better teams in the league in terms of how we finished in crunch-time games. But we're always going to try to keep getting better.

Q. Along the lines of kind of shifting, there was a lot of emphasis in the last two summers on individual development in the summer, all the things you talked about. Will there be a change in how guys practice together? Will there be more five-on-fives, team-oriented stuff this summer?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think the early part of the year, it will probably be a lot of the same because you're still gearing up your byes. We have a lot of guys still in the formative years of building their bodies physically. The early parts of the summer, individual skill, but a lot of body work.

As we transition more into the summer, I think there will be more opportunities as we get into June, July and August for developing chemistry. Obviously, we added two new players. I think there will be opportunities for the group to get together to build that stuff, the bonds that you need, but also stylistically, how they want to play, the chemistry. I think those things will be very important.

We've done a lot of that, but I think there will probably be more of a shift to that this summer.

Q. I have to ask you this. I apologize in advance. Have Will and Michael talked to you about your future, what is going to happen there? I mean, if that's going to happen, you have to get a new contract or an extension. That does have to be worked out.

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, fair question, for sure.

I'm always focused on the task at hand. I have great conversations with Michael and Will every day. I mean,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

that's how we always operated.

We're going to continue to focus on how to improve our team. Those conversations will always just happen organically. I'm focused on how we're going to get better. Obviously the season just ended.

I'm ready to attack that. That's how I look at things. I know that will work itself out.

Q. How well have you gotten to know A.D.? How do you envision slotting him into a role starting next year?

BRIAN KEEFE: Yeah, obviously excited for him and Tre. I think if we had a few more weeks left here, they probably would have been able to maybe get back on the court. Just obviously ran out of some time here.

I think that will be a big part of the off-season. First of all, those guys were terrific. They ingratiated themselves right away into our team. They are very giving guys, wanting to share their knowledge, pass that along. I was very impressed how they became part of our everyday environment almost right away.

But developing a relationship with those guys has been really important for me from day one. As you guys know, that's one of the biggest things in this business, is developing those things. We'll continue to do that over the summer, finding us a way stylistically that's going to put us in the best position to be successful. That's a collaboration from all of us, a collaboration with them.

Real excited they're in the fold. I thought those guys showed terrific leadership in a short amount of time they were here.

Q. How do you envision Alex and A.D. playing off each other, considering you haven't had really a rotation of two bigs over the last for the most part, two, three years?

BRIAN KEEFE: I think it's really exciting. You see a lot of teams in the league who are playing more of that as it goes. They're going to add an element to us that is obviously very exciting. Obviously, there will be details we have to work through how we do that. I think you're going to feel the imprint on us right away, the physicality, the size, the defense.

They are both extremely versatile guys that can do a lot of different things. I'm really excited to build around them and help us with our system.

Thanks, everybody. I won't get to see you for a little bit. I hope you have a good off-season. Seriously, you guys are with us every day. It's appreciated. I enjoy our conversations that we have when I come over and do the media sometimes twice a day. You guys have always been fair and kind to me. That doesn't go unnoticed by me, so thank you.

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