

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Stetson vs UConn

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

**Stetson Hatters**

**Coach Donnie Jones**

**Stephan Swenson**

**Alec Oglesby**

**Jalen Blackmon**

Media Conference

**Q. You guys are playing UConn, No. 1 in the country, reigning national champions. How do you guys feel seeing that come up on Selection Sunday?**

JALEN BLACKMON: It was great. They won it last year, and to play on this big of a stage against a team as good as them is going to be great.

ALEC OGLESBY: Yeah, just to piggyback what Jalen said, in the moment it was really exciting, just a surreal moment overall and to play against the reigning national champions is going to be a great opportunity for us.

STEPHAN SWENSON: Yeah, it is a great opportunity. We just can't wait to play tomorrow and prove everybody wrong.

**Q. Dan Hurley said you are one of the better guards they will face this season.**

JALEN BLACKMON: Yeah, that's awesome. I didn't even hear that yet. That's great to get that praise from a coach that's won as many games and as many tournaments as him.

**Q. For all three of you, but when you look at UConn, they come in with a lot of expectations, right, as the reigning national champions, but for Stetson, never having been here, I don't think from the outside, the expectations are maybe too high. For you guys does that help you play for free because you don't have the load of the expectation on your back coming in?**



STEPHAN SWENSON: Absolutely. You said it all.

They do have all the pressure in the world, and obviously it's our first time there. It's a great opportunity for us. Kind of just play with teammates and enjoy this moment to the fullest and just make the best out of it.

ALEC OGLESBY: Yeah, same thing. He said it all right there. I mean, there's really not a lot of pressure on us as much as them. So it's going to be a great opportunity, like I said beforehand, and just to be out there with our brothers and be able to just play hard, give it our all tomorrow will be a great opportunity.

JALEN BLACKMON: Yeah, it's going to be a great experience. We'll come out there and play free.

**Q. You'll be playing against probably Tristen Newton. Your impressions of him?**

STEPHAN SWENSON: Obviously he was named I think first team All-American. He's a great player, great experience. I think he's aggressive. It's going to be awesome to play against another really good player and see where I am as a level and as a team, how can I respond against a team full of great players and where they have all the awards.

**Q. UConn is a team that's on national television all the time. You guys, not so much. Obviously, tomorrow will probably be a rare time for you guys. You guys are so busy during the season and everything. How much have you had a chance to watch them play? Do you get a chance to see them play on TV or top teams like them when they are playing, do you flip it on?**

JALEN BLACKMON: Yeah. I've watched them a few times during the year.

ALEC OGLESBY: Yeah, same thing. I've watched them a couple times during the year. Obviously a team with great recognition around the country.

STEPHAN SWENSON: They are on national TV like you



said. Great team, great executional team. Had a really good schedule. So for us, it's just another great opportunity, like we've been saying, to play them tomorrow.

**Q. What have you learned about yourselves throughout this run as a team and individuals?**

STEPHAN SWENSON: Really, just emphasizing our togetherness and realize how tight of a team we are, and that any situation that come our way, we can figure it out as a team and as a family. We also figured out we can adapt to a lot of different situations and move on to different type of schemes, and it gives us confidence to play any team in the country.

ALEC OGLESBY: Absolutely. Steph said it all right there. We are a team with great chemistry and great brotherhood. Any moment, we're prepared. We've been through adverse moments and through highs and through lows and through it all. It's a really great brotherhood, so we are able to get through everything together.

JALEN BLACKMON: Same thing they said. Just how close we are, and being with this group, I've never been with a team that's this close.

So that's the best part.

**Q. When you are at your best as a team, how important is your three-point shooting accuracy to your success?**

JALEN BLACKMON: I think it's pretty important, but we have proven that we can win games without making 3s and with making 3s. So it is a big part of our game. But we have shown we can win both ways.

ALEC OGLESBY: Exactly. It's obviously a big part of our team, big part of our game. But we are able to play inside. We are able to play outside. I mean, our defense has taken big strides this year as well, so I think we are able to win games in a lot of different ways.

STEPHAN SWENSON: Exactly like they said. Every game requires something different. Like you said, our three point is a big part of our game, but we have shown in our past runs in the playoff for the AAC conference that we can win different, multiple ways.

DONNIE JONES: It's exciting to be here. I'd like to just open up giving God the glory for this opportunity here, for our program, for our school. And having this opportunity to bring them to this platform has been an amazing start for our team, and to be on this platform is something special.

**Q. A lot of the conversation is going to be about the blood, sweat and tears you've put in on the court, but I was curious from your perspective, if there's any off court investment you feel like you or the athletic department has made that has helped propelled you to your first ever tournament run?**

DONNIE JONES: I think there's a lot of things. There's a lot of little victories, as we would say, with this team. Our leadership and our athletic director, Jeff Altier, we have a HATS program that's been great for our whole program and investing in all of our teams.

We did a lot of things with our guys. Team building is built in the summer mainly. We did a lot of things in the summer with our guys in the community, a lot of things throughout the fall in our community. These guys have got a brotherhood and a love and a trust that's very unique. You get some of that from playing, obviously being in the battles together, but these guys have built a bond through a lot of little different things I think throughout the year.

**Q. Jalen and the rest of the guys were just talking about how this is the closest team that they think they have ever been on, each individually. For you, from your perspective, how important has that togetherness been throughout this run and will it become tomorrow when you take the court?**

DONNIE JONES: Yeah, I think it's important. I mean, you're talking about the little things that separate teams. Obviously you have to have talent. You win with character. You win with people. And these guys have been extraordinary. They are very humble. They love the game. They love to play. They love helping each other.

These guys have found ways, even when we had some tough losses in certain circumstances, they were resilient. We never lost more than two in a row and we'd bounce back with another win. So they never tucked their heads.

We played a very difficult non-conference schedule, and I said if we cannot get discouraged going through the process, let the process of us become the team and let the result be winning at the end of the year.

These guys, to their credit -- it's easy to say it now because we are sitting here in this scenario -- that we really embraced that, but they really did with their work ethic and how they bounced back. Culture is what you're doing when everybody is watching, right. It's everyday action. These guys have done just a great job of being a consistent participant with how they show up every day.

**Q. First time here for your program, just what does**



**this mean for your school, your program to be here and get a chance to play on this stage?**

DONNIE JONES: Yeah. It means everything. The excitement. 53 years, we have been Division I. To have a chance to come here on this platform. And I've been fortunate, I was part of that in some other programs as an assistant, so I knew the level of excitement it could bring to a community like DeLand. It's a wonderful community outside of Daytona Beach.

Great school that we have there. We've been known for our academic excellence and we've have some success in other sports, baseball, and women's basketball. We've had success in other sports, but men's basketball just had not been to this platform.

So to have this opportunity for our school to get this recognition and to tell our story about all the great things we got going on there, is just very humbling and very exciting.

**Q. You've been here with Florida and won back-to-back. Obviously you want to beat UConn, but are there some of the same traits from those Florida teams, are you seeing that in UConn the more you look into them?**

DONNIE JONES: Yeah, great question. They are equipped, no question. They have got depth, experience, coaching. Dan has done a great job. They have got tradition now. They have played an incredible schedule, and been consistent pretty much all year long.

To do it back-to-back is very hard to do, as you know. There's only been a few teams do that in 50 years. The group we had at Florida, to be able to do that, we had a unique brotherhood and closeness. And I look at Dan's roster and he's got five guys averaging double figures. His team is good like our team was. We had five guys that averaged double figures back-to-back years, same guys.

So it's not just one or two guys that carries that team. They have depth and they have a lot of different weapons, and I think with that, it gives them a chance to possibly be able to do that.

**Q. When you saw UConn's name that you were playing them, what was your reaction?**

DONNIE JONES: It's exciting any time we are playing the No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament. You could have told me at this time at the beginning of the year that you're going to the NCAA Tournament and you're going to play UConn, I think we'd be pretty excited.

So I think the opportunity, the stage, you know, is everything. It's not the NBA where you have to win four games in seven. You have to win for 40 minutes.

I have got a lot of respect for UConn. When I was head coach at UCF, played UConn, they were No. 4 in the country and had won the national championship. We upset them then. I think I've got a lot of respect for that program and know the stage that this is for our guys.

**Q. You go back earlier in the season when you faced No. 1, then, Houston. What type of lessons could be gleaned from that loss now that you're playing the new No. 1 team in the country in UConn, you can implement now?**

DONNIE JONES: There's a lot of lessons. I remember that game, pointing to it to our guys, we have talked about that here in the last few days. One thing that stood out to me was our guys were really upset we lost and that showed to me that they had an expectation that, one, we could create better.

You can't create that environment. Obviously Houston is athletic, well-coached, tough, they have all the weapons just like UConn does. You can't create that scenario or even watch an old film and understand it.

So our guys have experienced that. So there's a lot of things from that game that helped us and helped us go in and play Cincinnati to the end. It helped us beat UCF, a Big 12 team on the road that beat three Top-25 teams at their house.

So that game helped us, and it helped us win a championship in those last three games. When things were tough in the huddle, it wasn't my voice in the huddle. It was our team in the huddle saying, hey, we are coming together and we are going to win this game. We have been there and we have played against the best teams in the country, all right, we belong.

So I think those things are the little victories that you go through a season, and the process helps you become a winner at the end.

**Q. You know, a couple of No. 1 seeds have gone down finally the last couple years. Does that help you dream or allow you to dream a little bit more and what is the -- it's almost hard to find somebody who is not picking UConn to win back-to-back. What is the key for your guys to compete or win this game? Does it have as much to do with them handling the stage as it does dealing with UConn?**



DONNIE JONES: Yeah, you know, there's so many things. Hey, Roger Bannister, I said this the other day to our team, you know, ran the four-minute mile, right. Nobody could break it for a long time, but once he broke it, the next week ten guys broke it.

A lot of it is mentality and understanding and you have to have a belief in who you are. What's got us this far is what we have got to continue to do and play to our strength with that. We can't get caught up in everything UConn is because they are a lot.

I think for us, it's going to be 95 percent about us and 5 percent about them. We have to go out and play with confidence. We understand the pace of the game and the depth they have and all the weapons they got. But I think we just got to go out and make sure that we don't get overwhelmed in the moment and know there will be runs in this game and know that the big plays and the excitement that they can bring with their talent is something that we've got to be able to sustain for 40 minutes.

Thank you, all. Appreciate it.

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