

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Wagner vs North Carolina

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Spectrum Center

**Wagner Seahawks**

**Donald Copeland**

**Tahron Allen**

**Julian Brown**

**Melvin Council Jr.**

Media Conference



**Q. I'm just curious for all three of you guys, if you could speak to the challenge that you face, obviously it's a whole different level here. North Carolina, top seed, basically at home. All three of you talk about that a little bit. What lies ahead tomorrow for you?**

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: The challenge is the same challenge like it's always been, underdogs. We're all the same at the end of the day. They just had a good school program, and we have a little school. But we preach toughness every day, so that's what we're going to carry on with.

JULIAN BROWN: We're very confident. Regardless of the name, regardless of who we play, we're going to go out there and put our brand of basketball on display. It really doesn't matter who we play.

Of course, give credit to them. They're a great team, but we're also a great team. So we're going to come out there and put our brand on display.

TAHRON ALLEN: We preach every day what's on the back of our jersey, what we do in the huddle, toughness. When we get between those four lines, we're here to compete. Everything is fun, but we're not here just to have fun. We're here to compete, no matter who we're playing against.

**Q. I was reading about -- they were talking about this on the TV broadcast the other night, and I was reading about the seven scholarship players not being able to practice live since December. How do you prepare to play major college basketball games when you're that short in numbers, playing through games, but also even preparation, trying to get in practice rhythm and get better at things when you're so limited in what you can do?**

TAHRON ALLEN: We've been going against our coaches. We're thankful to have a good coaching staff that has previous records of playing basketball and a good history of playing basketball. So they give us challenge every day.

THE MODERATOR: We're about to start with the student-athletes from Wagner.

**Q. Can you go through the last -- and this could be for any of you guys. Can you go through the last 24 hours, what it's like to be playing in one city, hopping on a plane, getting here, getting ready for another round. What have the emotions been like for you as a team?**

TAHRON ALLEN: It's been very fun, just processing everything. Not just the win last night, but just our whole season, us actually winning the championship. We're still trying to process that. So we've been getting a lot of support and love from that.

But just going from one city to another city is very fun, especially from the conference we're coming from. Everything is kind of near each other. So it's very fun, and we're grateful for all of this.

JULIAN BROWN: Like he said, it's been very surreal. Like I always say, I think the Man upstairs gave the opportunity to us to play at the highest level against one of the best teams in the country. I've got to give credit to the guys, the staff, the coaches, the school. They've done a great job of giving us this opportunity and backing us with every event that we have. So I appreciate this opportunity.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: I've got to thank the school and the fans for supporting us. We have seven players, so it's so unreal. We're excited to be here.



And a lot of our days are just mental days -- locking in on film, locking in on matchups, who we have coming up, locking in on the little things like shooting and our defensive principles.

JULIAN BROWN: I think at this time it's all about maturity. This late in the season, we all know what we have to do. Of course, going up and down would help us, but everything is about maturity right now. It's late in the season. Everybody knows everybody.

So it's just about us coming together and staying connected through these times.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: Like Tahron said, going against the coaches, they've got a good résumé of playing basketball. So just playing against them in practice to prepare us to win games and stuff.

**Q. For all three of you again, if you could each give me your impression of Coach Copeland and what he means to you guys individually and as a team.**

TAHRON ALLEN: He means everything to us. He's the head of this team. We trust in him. We believe in him. He's brought us this way, not just us on the court, but outside the court, how we carry ourselves. He's implemented a lot of stuff with us.

Like I said before, he preaches toughness with us. That's not just on the court. It's how we carry ourselves every day. He's there for us, and we're there for him. He has us on the court, and we have him back. I'm very grateful for him, and we love him.

JULIAN BROWN: Similar answer, he preaches toughness and puts us through adversity every day on and off the court. So being in these opportunities where we're very comfortable where we're at.

Like Tahron said, we love him. He's the head of this pack, and we're going to follow him. Whatever he asks us, we're going to do at a high level.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: The reason why I came to Wagner because my favorite movie is Coach Carter, and he's similar to Coach Carter. That's why I chose Wagner.

**Q. Going into last night's game and looking at tonight, you're only promised one more game. Everything that you guys have been through this season, how do you wrap that around your head going into a game like this tomorrow? And just looking back on what you guys were doing in June and July to get prepared for this type of season. How has it come full circle for you all?**

TAHRON ALLEN: Nothing's promised, like I said. Nothing was promised. Losing guys weren't promised. We didn't know what was in store for us this whole season, but what we did know is we were going to face some type of adversity, good or bad, and I feel like that prepares us for this moment, no matter what team we're playing.

Yes, we are going against a great team, but our preparation is still the same. Our intensity is still the same. How we approach the game is still the same.

JULIAN BROWN: Like Tahron said, just going through adversity every day with our own problems and with the team and stuff like that. I think we're going to be very comfortable in this game, regardless of who we play. It really doesn't matter. We've got confidence in each other. Coach has got confidence in us. So we're going to go out there and put our brand on display.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: We've been through a lot, and we preach toughness, like I said before. So nothing's promised.

**Q. Congratulations to all you guys. The Tri-state area is really rooting for you guys. They want to see you guys go all the way. What's your message to everyone out here watching you and rooting for you? What do you want to say just to everyone as you guys go? You guys have never made it this far for your school. You guys are already legends on campus. What's your message to everyone, that you're just going to give it your all?**

JULIAN BROWN: Our message is we're going to keep doing what we've been doing since the beginning of the season. I really can't say anything to you all. You've just got to have confidence in us.

We're still going to be tough. We're still going to compete. We're still going to be Wagner. It's going to be like we were day 1, and now it's going to be the same. So I guess we're going to be toughness, and that's all.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: Nothing's going to change. We're going to still play our game, still bring that fight to us, the dog in us, and the toughness, so yeah.

TAHRON ALLEN: Piggy-backing off what they say, we're going to put our brand on display and continue being what we've been being, which got us to this point exactly in our season.

Also just thank you, we appreciate the support. We take pride in playing for our Tri-state area and where we come



from.

**Q. Congratulations, first and foremost. We've been on the campus of Wagner University this morning. Very few students, of course, because you guys are on spring break, but any message that you want to send to the student body. They said they had several hundred people watching the games here on campus, and tomorrow night they're expecting a big crowd to watch you guys. Any message you want to send to those fans gathering here to watch you?**

TAHRON ALLEN: We appreciate you guys' support. We hope you guys continue supporting us. We're not just doing it just for us, just for our team, but we're also doing it for our community and our school. So we appreciate everybody, and we love putting on for you guys.

JULIAN BROWN: Like he just said, similar answer. We appreciate the love. We appreciate the support. It goes a long way. Sometimes we get down, but we know that, not just the teammates and the staff, but the school has our back. I feel like that's a big thing going into games, and we definitely do appreciate you all from the bottom of our hearts.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: We definitely do appreciate you all, the whole Staten Island, Wagner campus. We appreciate you all, and we see everything.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, guys. Thank you.

We're ready to start with Coach Copeland.

DONALD COPELAND: You guys aren't bringing Bashir Mason up here, are you? I'm trying to shake this guy. I hear he's in Carolina right now (laughter).

Really excited to be here, especially it just continues, the story keeps getting written right now. Then winning the game the other day -- last night, I should say -- really special moment for our group. It takes a lot to win one basketball game. The way we did it, I think it's kind of how we played all year.

And then now to continue the journey, to continue the experience for these guys, you can't ask for anything more.

**Q. Coach, for people around the country that might not know about the Wagner story and looking at what you guys have gone through for this entire season, even with your healthy players, how can you sum up the moment of winning last night and looking back at the season, but also knowing that, okay, we're only promised one more game. You can move on. But just**

**kind of full circle moment of where you guys were before the season and where you are right now.**

DONALD COPELAND: I think everyone starts their season with certain level of expectations, and I expected to have 13 players, but we always don't get what we want. You kind of just got to roll with it right now.

The main thing I tried to focus on and coach daily was the culture. Never let us fall into doubt. I never dumb down our expectations. Like any other team in the country, you go through ups and downs, you go through tough times throughout because the season is such a grind already.

We never focused on just having seven. We focused on what we needed to do in practice. We focused on what the next opponent was going to do to try and win a game. Then now, if you do it the right way, which we believe we're trying to, it gives you a chance to have success.

Then now to have it come full circle, not just to win an NEC championship, which is already hard to do, to win an NCAA Tournament game, we came in just trying to make sure we were going to be who we were. It wasn't trying to show anybody that individually we're good. We wanted to do it how we've been doing it with our culture.

I think that gave us the best chance, and we're really fortunate to win the game and be here now.

**Q. They say you play like you practice, but you're not practicing live since December. How do you prepare a team -- guys mentioned some of the coaches are still pretty nimble, but how do you prepare a team to compete at this level of college basketball when you don't have bodies and you're not able to go through what you normally would with a practice prep?**

DONALD COPELAND: I won't ever talk about myself being a good coach, but I'm still a very good player. I want that to be known. I'm still very good.

(Laughter).

No, it's not ideal. There's no script for it. I still have friends in college coaching. No one could tell me how to do this right now.

It was unorthodox at times, for sure. I had to switch certain thing. I had to change some of our drills differently. I had to come up with new things. The main thing I did have, coaches implemented -- they did a great job. My staff was phenomenal throughout this whole thing because I drive them as well, and then I'm also asking them to be token players as we prepare for other teams. They did it.

They're in great shape, I make sure of it.

But it was unconventional. Like I said, the main thing I coached harder than anything was the culture. So like if we had a certain drill we were doing, there was an expectation of excellence. When we weren't that, they were held accountable.

Nonetheless, that's the best thing I could do to normalize the situation. Otherwise, it would be a dead gym. You'd start thinking about seven players and whatnot. When you play the game, nobody really cares. They're trying to beat you.

So for the most part, we just tried to stay upbeat. Changes were made, and my group of guys were great. They embraced everything that was coming. Whatever we were doing, they were locked in the same way.

**Q. Obviously with this journey you're carving out over here, your reward for last night is Number 1 seed essentially in a home building. Can you speak to that challenge and just how you pivot from last night into what you've got facing tomorrow?**

DONALD COPELAND: It's a big one. I might as well get this out now. Growing up as a kid, I was a big North Carolina fan. I always rooted for Seton Hall for sure, but definitely a North Carolina fan because obviously they were always on TV winning and things of that nature.

So it's probably a little bit more meaning for me to coach against them. But, no, they're as tough as you get in the country.

One thing that jumps off the page to me, as talented as they are, they are not trying to out-talent you. They are competing at every bounce, every screen, all of the little things they do at an elite level, which is why they're one of the top teams in the country.

So this is a big, big challenge for our team, our program. We understand that, though, and we've got to compete, we've got to be ourselves right now, and just stay focused for 40 minutes. We're not going in there knowing -- we don't expect them to take us lightly because that's not who they are.

But it's an experience, and we'll be as ready as we can be to play.

**Q. Knowing that you've seen and your players have seen other 16 seed teams have success, and you look at what you guys did in the conference tournament, even last night, I don't think you guys need any more**

**inspiration, but what is that message going to be like for you at practice and then also leading into tomorrow's game?**

DONALD COPELAND: We're here to compete. We've already begun talking about that. Definitely inspiration from other 16 seeds that have been able to achieve this, and I would say more impressive what FDU did, especially after going through this whole travel we've had to endure to do this, to see what they did.

No, it's inspirational for sure. It is without a doubt because it's hard, it's special. But we also understand our path, our journey is different. So we can't really hang on that right now. We've got to try to find our niche in this game to compete. Like I said, we're going to be ready to play. We're going to prepare the same and have our same energy right now and really do the best we can with it.

**Q. I do have a big picture question for you beyond just this tournament game. We're at a point in time with transfers, it's easy players to up and go. We see St. Peter's only has one left in the game from two years ago. What's your idea of keeping players, I don't know if it's re-recruiting or keeping tabs on what they're thinking, other schools expressing interest in guys you have. How do you view all that, the challenge of that?**

DONALD COPELAND: I think it's challenging. College sports in general is constantly changing. Right now we have NIL and transfer portal. Five, ten years from now, we'll be talking about something else that's now integrated in college sports that we'll have to adjust to. You'll have to adjust with it.

So when the time comes, I'm going to have conversations with guys and whatnot. I'm going to have honest ones, though, and now that's what I've done, that's what we've been doing here. I would say we're one of the programs that actually have been able to retain some key pieces and key components.

Just a couple years ago, we had a Player of the Year, Alex Morales, who played five positions, he actually returned to the school to get Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year because he respected the honesty about what we saw for his future.

I understand that all the kids now, they want it now. Everybody wants it now. You try to give them a vision of what things can come, but again, they'll make their own decisions, which is fine. I don't really feel a way about it. I think that's a part of it as well. There's no love lost behind it if somebody does want to move on from your program.

But you don't change the culture of your program because the culture of your program, it's not something you can touch. It's not a person. It's not something you can smell. It's that always has to stay the same way no matter what anybody coming through in and out of your doors.

But to answer your question, I'll talk to these guys. Will it be a re-recruitment? I don't know. It's going to be more of what we see for you right now and how this can go. They'll make decisions. They're more than welcome to come back. If they move on, the program has to move on as well in support of them.

So I would say that's the best way to handle it.

**Q. Do you happen to look at things like how St. Peter's did a couple of years ago and use that as motivation, small school doing big things, as you talk to the kids about the possibility of what they can do in tomorrow night's game and win in the future?**

DONALD COPELAND: Similar to what FDU and UMBC accomplished before, I would say it's inspirational. I think these guys are motivated already, just the fact they'll be able to compete again. I think it's special that small programs like ours are able to compete and have success. So you use it as inspiration if anything is possible right now, if you go about this the right way.

But at the same time, their journeys, their games are different than what we're probably going to face tomorrow. So we can only focus on the opponent right now to prepare ourselves the best way we can.

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