

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

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Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

VCU Rams

Phil Martelli Jr.

Terrence Hill Jr.

Jadrian Tracey

Lazar Djokovic

Brandon Jennings

Media Conference



to this point. Obviously we were here last year and just taking that experience all in, learning from the guys that have played in that game, and just the whole atmosphere overall.

Just coming back with a confident mindset. I have a lot of confidence in my teammates coming into this year for us to do damage in the tournament.

I'm just really excited and proud of where I am right now. I just want to stay in the moment and be where my feet are at, just be with my teammates, and hopefully we get this W tomorrow.

Q. Obviously North Carolina is one of the most storied brands in college basketball history. Talk about that opportunity for you all as a program to face off with a team and a brand that people know well around college basketball.

BRANDON JENNINGS: UNC, like you said, it's a well-known name. So just being able to line up in front of them at this time of year is great, and we're going to take advantage of this opportunity, and we're going to handle business.

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: At the end of the day, we play against UNC, but we don't play against the brand. We play against the players wearing those jerseys. I think we have a really great chance tomorrow to win it.

JADRIAN TRACEY: I'd just say like we're VCU too. VCU is historically known for a lot of big things too. Like he said, we're just going to show up and play against them boys just like they've got to play against us.

TERRENCE HILL JR.: Like everyone said, it's another game for us. Obviously it's a bigger game we're playing against UNC, but we don't look at it that way. We're going to take it one game at a time and continue to advance in this tournament.

Q. Bam, you've been here before. Terrence and Brandon have been too. You're one of the most experienced guys on this roster. What have you told guys about your past experiences, and what does it take to handle on this stage?

THE MODERATOR: We're joined today by Terrence Hill Jr., Jadrian Tracey, Lazar Djokovic, and Brandon Jennings.

Q. How does it feel compared to last year to be back on this stage?

TERRENCE HILL JR.: It feels good to be back in this atmosphere with these guys, like you said coming back to back. It's a great experience overall. Hopefully we can take advantage of it this year.

BRANDON JENNINGS: It's been great. Just learning from these guys all year. We started in June, so it's been a long road. Just to be back here in this position has been a blessing.

Q. Lazar, you talked about the butterflies thinking about March Madness. How about now?

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: It feels unreal. The emotion hasn't hit yet. This was a dream two years ago and I'm finally fulfilling that dream, and I'm just blessed to be here.

Q. This question is for Terrence. Just I remember two years ago covering you in the state championship before you even committed to VCU at that time. What do you think about your journey over the last few years?

TERRENCE HILL JR.: It's been a long journey just to get



... when all is said, we're done.®

JADRIAN TRACEY: I'd just say anything can happen here, just growing up and watching this my whole life. Just very blessed to be here. Just going in here and playing hard. We're worried about what we did all year, which is play hard.

We're trying to win a game. We ain't just here to show up, like just for no field trip. We're here to really compete and make some noise.

Q. Everybody talks about the UNC brand, but I want to kind of piggy-back on what you just said, hey, we're just here for this. What is it that you guys bring to the table that you want the nation to know about VCU?

BRANDON JENNINGS: I mean, we're bringing that havoc. We start on the defensive end, and we let our defense translate to our offense. We like to play fast, and we like to get up and pressure. Then we like to have fun out there, play selfless, share the ball, and just make good shots.

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: I feel like me personally, I just want to represent VCU, what it's done for me this year, putting me on the map, let's say it that way. I just want to represent it with the boys because I love them. I really enjoy playing with this team and everybody. The coaches, the staff, everybody has been so nice to me. They've made me not only a better basketball player, but a better human, which I'll appreciate for life. I want to represent that.

JADRIAN TRACEY: I'd just say the jersey on the front. The name on the front and the name on the back. Just go out there and show them who we are and just go out there and compete really, compete at the highest level. This is a blessing to be here and have this opportunity. A lot of people don't have this opportunity to even get here.

That's what we've been talking about as a group. Just going out here and showing them who we are, who VCU is, and the grittiness of our team.

TERRENCE HILL JR.: Like everyone said, I think it's just our togetherness. Like Lazar said, he loves everyone on this team as much as I do. I love every guy on our team.

The toughness we play with, like Brandon said, we're a selfless team, we do it for each other. Every time we step on the court, no matter who's coming in, we're just excited for each other when we get out there.

I think it's just our togetherness and how tough we are.

Q. Lazar, going into this matchup, a lot of people talking about you and Veesaar. I think I'm saying his

name right. Have you been studying his game the last couple of days and just that matchup of two really good bigs?

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: I knew the guy since he was in Europe. He played for Real Madrid, so well-known name coming out of Europe. I knew he's a big skill guy. I've been studying his game the last few days, but I really knew the guy coming from Europe. So I'll be relying on that.

THE MODERATOR: We are lucky to be joined now by head coach Phil Martelli Jr.

Coach, if you could give an opening statement.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Real excited to be here. Thankful to the city of Greenville for their hospitality that we've seen so far since we've been here. Getting to the NCAA Tournament never gets old, it just never does. When you get a taste of it, you just want to come back and come back and come back.

I feel very, very blessed to be here, have my family here, and just truly excited for our guys. It's a really good group, a group I've loved coaching from the day we got them. Glad that we deserve to be called champions now and get this opportunity to compete in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Lazar said he had some familiarity with Veesaar coming up in Europe. He said he played for Real Madrid. Just your thoughts on that matchup, coming up against two good bigs, how it dictates everything that happens in this game?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yes, it's huge. Obviously with Wilson going out for them, the superstar freshman, you can see how Veesaar really stepped up. He was playing really well to begin with, but really stepped up and became a focal point for them.

It is good he has that familiarity. Those foreign guys usually do, those European guys know, because he knows Bogavac too, 44, the kid from Montenegro. He kind of has that idea of who they are and where they're from.

That matchup is a big one, right? We need Lazar to be at his best and hopefully help neutralize -- I don't think you -- Veesaar is not one of those guys that you can just like shut him down, but you've got to try and neutralize. If Lazar is at his best on both ends of the floor, hopefully he can do that.

Q. Wanted to know how you think pace of play will affect tomorrow night's game?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, they want to go. They're Carolina, right? Carolina has always been an up-tempo, fast-break team. They want to go. We want to go. The reality is we have to get stops so we can get out in transition. I do think there's some advantages there, but we have to get stops first. You guys know that watching us all year.

That's what it's predicated on is getting those stops, and we can now go. And then we've got to get back in transition. We've seen this now with a handful of teams where they need to see our half-court defense. Our half-court defense has been pretty good, especially down the stretch here. So we need them to see our half-court defense and then guard them the right way when we get back.

Q. What have you seen in terms of just the difference between the guys who have been here and the guys who haven't yet? Have you seen guys like Jadrian, some of the more experienced guys on this roster, obviously, Brandon, Mike, Terrence were here last year. Have they imparted anything they learned from past experiences to the guys who are experiencing their first time on this stage?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: We have quite a few that have been here. Our two guys from last year they've been here. Obviously the four returning guys were here last year with VCU. Bam's been there. Ahmad's been there. Those guys have an idea. They understand what this means.

Again, our thing is always about we take business trips, we don't take field trips, right? Making sure that those guys understand we're here for business. Those guys that haven't been here before, we're here to take care of business, and business is trying to go get Number 1 tomorrow night.

But at the same time understanding that take this in a little bit. This is special. This is special. By the time we play tomorrow, there's going to be 55, 56, somewhere in that range, teams left. After teams lose last night, tonight, tomorrow, and understanding how special that is because there's 300-some teams that are sitting back watching you play, just dying to be where you are, and understanding that that's a pretty special thing.

Q. Can you tell me a little bit about how you feel like last year's experience at Bryant and getting into the tournament has helped you be more successful coming into this year?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: It really is huge. I'm a big believer you have to be somewhere and feel it and taste it to really

understand it and be prepared for it fully. Having that experience, just for myself being able to go back and say, okay, what did we do last year? What was the blueprint we used last year? And then adjusting it where it needs to be adjusted.

That's everything. It's logistics, right? It's practice. Do we practice before the open practice, or do we go practice after the open practice? How do we time all that up? How do we line up our meals and our meeting times and all these things to give them some time to kind of decompress but also make sure we're keeping them locked in on the business at hand?

So I think that's a really big deal, having that experience, for the players and for the coaching staff to be able to say this is what worked last time, this is what didn't work, and we need to adjust that.

Q. Have you leveraged your father's experience and the number of times that he went there and how it -- in solving some of those things you just mentioned?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Without a doubt. Really with everywhere that I've been and been around where we had this experience, right? Like there's certain -- there's a lot of his fingerprints on stuff that we do, not just at the NCAA Tournament, but throughout the season.

But there's also Joe Mihalic's fingerprints from when we went at Niagara, and Monté Ross' fingerprints from when we went at Delaware and so on and so on and so on. I'm definitely my own person with my own things and have that compilation of those guys that I worked for and worked with and draw on their experience and say, you know what, this is what they did. This is what we did back in 2007 when we played Kansas, and it was good. Let's try to implement that somehow, some way in using those people.

Certainly if you had the pie chart, my dad's influence would certainly be the biggest, biggest piece of pie, which he'd probably like. He'd probably like the biggest piece of pie.

Q. After talking with your guys not long ago, they bring a lot of confidence to the table. How did that confidence come about, and how will you guys use that to help go through this tournament play?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Well, that confidence comes from, one, they're really good players, and they're really good people. Two, it's how hard they work. They put a lot of work in, not just on the court, but the way they treat their bodies, the way they get in the training room and the weight room and all those things, the way they watch film.

They were talking about things in our first film session yesterday, and I'm like, oh, man, they've watched. I'm not surprised by that, but like they went on their own on Monday, and they went and watched and had an idea.

The next piece of it is we compete every day. The two big words in our gym, in our practice gym, are develop and compete. We do that every single day. So our first workout was June 9th. We were doing player development, and we were competing that day. They even joked about it, we were playing one-on-one that day and competing.

Some days, when I first got the job, we had three or four guys in the gym. We finished those workouts, playing one-on-one. We're going to compete. So you get a comfort and a confidence from competing every day.

Along with that, we played a really tough nonconference schedule, by far one of the toughest in our conference and one of the toughest in the country. We could have ducked Utah State, NC State, could have ducked the three games in the Bahamas and bailed on New Mexico. No, we played all those games for a reason. It toughened us and got us ready so we could go win really hard games in March in what was a really hard conference this year.

Being able to kind of draw back on all those experiences -- and they're really resilient. They are a really, really resilient group, both ways, from positives and negatives. When things are going well, they're resilient enough to go, okay, we need to get back to center and go back to work. When things maybe aren't going well, it's, okay, we've been here before and we can figure this out, and we're going to get through this. And they've done that from the very beginning.

Q. Do you hope some Duke fans who are in the area might find it in their hearts to change their colors for black and gold tomorrow given the matchup?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I would imagine so. Those rivalries run deep. I go back to my senior year in college. We were in a 7-10 game against Auburn. This is back, you know, dating myself, like there were still fax machines. Before the assistants got back to the office, Alabama had faxed everything they had on Auburn. So those types of rivalries -- that's a true story.

I'm quite sure that there's a lot of Duke fans making their quick trip down to Greenville here. I would imagine that whatever time they play early after that game, they're trading in black and gold. We'll take them all. We'll be your second favorite team, even if it's just for a day.

But our fans will travel, you guys know that. Our fans are second to none with that. Obviously Carolina will have a huge presence here, but don't be shocked when you walk in and you see black and gold in a lot of places and you hear those people. Like you will hear those people, and you will damn sure hear the Peppas, our band. It's not even close. There's not a No. 2, like they're Number 1 wherever it is. We'll have a presence, I'm sure of that.

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