

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

Thursday, March 19, 2026
Greenville, South Carolina, USA
Bon Secours Wellness Arena

VCU Rams

Phil Martelli Jr.

Terrence Hill Jr.

Brandon Jennings

Nyk Lewis

Lazar Djokovic

Media Conference

VCU - 82, North Carolina - 78

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations on the win. If you could give an opening statement.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I just told the guys that that game was the perfect microcosm of who this group has been. They've been resilient as much as any group I've ever been around. We've done it all year.

Second game of the year we went down 17 against Utah State. Came all the way back, tied the game. I knew right then and there, I said we've got something here. We've got something because we have that resilience and you can't be successful without it.

They've shown it time and time and time again, and today on the biggest stage was one of those days. For everybody else watching, this is March. This is what March does.

I'm really proud of these guys. I've said it a number of times, like they make a mediocre coach look good, and it's because of these guys. I'm really proud of them.

Q. Terrence, I asked you a question yesterday. Everybody was worried about the UNC brand, and I asked you specifically what is it about your brand, the VCU brand, that you want the world to know? The follow-up question to that is, do they know it now?



TERRENCE HILL JR.: Yeah, they know it now. I think they've been knew it. VCU has a great history behind us, and we want to represent it as much as possible. This is out back-to-back year coming to the NCAA Tournament. One of my goals this year was not to be a first-round exit. I wanted to come in with that mindset and leave the VCU history on.

It don't matter who we play, UNC, it don't matter. Blue bloods, it don't matter, we got the same mindset every game.

Q. Brandon, last time VCU, your mom, three degrees from VCU. Last time VCU won a game in the Tournament was 2016. Ten years later, what does it mean for you to be on this team?

BRANDON JENNINGS: It's special. It starts with this group of guys. We started from day one. We've just been working every day. It's really a surreal moment. It's really heartfelt, and I'm just glad to be a part of winning for sure.

Q. Terrence, 20 out of 34 points after halftime. What did you see happen there in the second half? Was it just a matter of the confidence growing with each shot that you made?

TERRENCE HILL JR.: Coach was kind of on us at halftime about missing easy layups, that we had to go to the basket and finish strong and settle in. I felt like I wasn't myself in that first half. I know my team needs me down the stretch.

Going into the second half, I wanted to be as aggressive as possible. When the plays were there for me to make them, I was going to make them. And if my teammates were open, I was going to hit them.

Q. For any of you guys, there's a stretch where it was 75-70 UNC. You close the game winning 82-78 only allowing three points the whole rest of the game. What was going into that defensive mindset, and how were you able to get those stops when UNC was very successful earlier?

NYK LEWIS: The big key is just staying focused. Like



Coach says, it's a resilient group. We've been through a lot of struggles -- Utah State, out of conference, in-conference games, battling back. So I feel like it battle tested us for those moments and really dig in and keep getting stops.

Q. This could be for any of the players. To go back to the brand thing a little bit, it seemed like a few of their guys were hyping that quite a bit as they had a lead there. I'm wondering if you guys noticed it, if you took it personally at all, and what it feels like putting them in their place when you come back?

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: I've been talking to the big fella the whole game. It kind of got me mad. Hit those back-to-back 3s, and from then on we smelled the blood. We see the look in their faces, and from then on, we just went on a run.

Q. Seemed like in the first half you guys had a tough time keeping the Tar Heels out of transition, maybe with turnovers. I'm wondering how that changed in the second half with the comeback.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Honestly it's what they just said, it was on missed layups. We only had four turnovers at the half. One of them was a shot clock violation. We did have two bad ones that led to run-outs. But it was on layups.

The floor balance when you go in there, because I told them -- we were 5 for whatever we were. 7-for-17 on 2s, and they didn't block a shot. So we missed ten layups. It really was that. Transition was the number one key. Sometimes people say transition defense, well, it starts with the offense. If you get a good shot and you have a good floor balance, then your transition defense is set.

When we're driving it and missing layups and crashing the glass and put-back miss, and now they're able to run past us really was the key. Then we went in there in the second half and we were more demonstrative going to finish.

Q. Coach, talk about the standard you brought into the team that is being consistent that helped you win this?

THE MODERATOR: Can you repeat that? Were you just talking about being consistent?

Q. A standard that Coach has brought into the team that has remained consistent or something they've grown into to help them win games like this?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Obviously every program has those big buzzwords. "Consistency" and "resilience" are two of them for us. The consistency starts -- really starts with me,

like I have to be consistent in every day.

Sometimes coaches ask for their players to be consistent, and then they're not consistent. We just try to be consistent as a staff. We try to be consistent with who we are every day, with what we expect. Part of that consistency is the way we compete every day. These guys have been competing since June 9th. They joked after the championship game on Sunday, man, we've been playing one-on-one since June. We do. We play one-on-one. We play live. We're constantly in competition.

And we're constantly in situations like this. Hey, you're down. Go come back. There's no excuse for it. Just come back. Find a way to come back and make a play. And those guys did that.

Q. What did your dad tell you before the game, and what does it mean to you to kind of put your name up there and kind of follow in his footsteps with this?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: He said go down, get a 19-point deficit in the second half, and then just start coaching.

(Laughter).

No, he's the same always. To him it's always about people, and he's always that pour into your guys, pour into the people, pour into the staff. Love those guys as much as you can love them. Give them everything you've got.

The funny thing with him is it's never Xs and Os. We never talk Xs and Os. He never says to me, hey, here's a really good play to run. You should be playing more of this, do more of that. He never says that. It's always about keep your guys focused. Look out for this. Make sure you're blocking out distractions, all those things. It is awesome. It's awesome.

He won his first A-10 championship his second year, and he went to the Sweet 16. So we're semi even right now, I guess. Winning in your first year and winning a game your first year would make us semi even, but we've got to try to top what he did.

Q. Walk us through the last --

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I am going to shout you guys out. I know there's a lot of professional media here. Our student media, the best in the country. They are unreal, unreal, unreal. Three of these guys drove in a snowstorm, I'm not sure why they did it, to cover Davidson. They came out to St. Louis. They've been everywhere along the way.

Two of them did miss the game for Valentine's Day, but we



won't talk about that. I understand, young love is young love. But this crew right here, I told them in Pittsburgh and I'll tell them again, cannot thank you guys enough. You are what this is about right there.

I said it in Pittsburgh. The rest of these are getting paid, not enough. They don't get paid enough, but they do get paid to be here. You don't get paid to be here, and you show up every single game. Go ahead.

Q. Those words truly mean a lot. Walk us through the play. Terrence hit the 3 to get the lead in overtime. Was that what you drew up?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, we wanted to obviously get him in ball screen it was good for us. Because they were switching, we were trying to get more into Lazar with their switching. Terrence just popped open. He was open, and he did what good players do. He makes a shot, and then the coach runs around and acts like, yeah, I drew up something great.

No, a great player made a great shot, and I'm fortunate to be his coach.

Q. Two-part question. First of all, did you notice, it looked like from the side that North Carolina was starting to tire down the stretch. Did you notice that? Secondly, what does it mean for the program? I think it's been since 2016 since the last tournament win. What does this mean for you guys?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I did notice that. The last four minutes, we said that. I think it was five at that point in time.

We're kind of built for that. Like I said, we compete every day. Our strength coach Danny Roose, as good as there is in the country.

He chooses to stay at VCU. He has everybody pulling him, NBA power forwards, they all want him, but he loves VCU. He trains those guys and gets them ready. The way we practice, they're up and down all the time, they're ready to go.

A couple of shots that went short, I said, we've got them right here. If we can just make a couple more shots, we're going to have a shot.

What it means for the program is this is a storied program. I'm very fortunate to be here. There are a lot of people, a lot of players, coaches that came before that built this foundation of this program. We're lucky to be the current group. As my dad would say, we're not the greatest, we're

just the latest.

We're fortunate to be at a great program. I am very fortunate. I'm fortunate for Ed McLaughlin. I'm fortunate for Dr. Michael Rao, our entire administration, everybody that has trusted me and trusted our staff with such a storied program.

One of the big words in there is legacy. All the tournaments and the big shots and the wins and all that, and we're just trying to add to that legacy. We're not trying to create anything new. We're just trying to build on what's been built upon and add a new story to that legacy.

Q. There's a big sign in the BDC, "Win With Us or Watch Us Win." How did the guys and yourself bring that mentality today?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Credit to DJ Khaled. If he's watching and listening, he wants to be part of it, he can jump on the black and gold. He said it in the beginning of one of his songs GOD DID with Jay-Z and those guys. It was just something, as we got the job, we were talking. I said, all right, you either want to be a part of this or you don't. I told anybody that -- fortunately, most of these guys came and decided to come, but there were a couple of recruits that were on the fence. I said, look, you can do what you want to do, but understand you can win with us or sit back and watch us win. That's a fact.

Really there's no other alternative at VCU. Back to that legacy. That's what VCU is. We're chasing greatness all the time. VCU chases greatness all the time in everything that VCU does. In medicine, in the arts, in everything, VCU chases greatness, and we're chasing greatness in men's basketball as well. Part of that is you're going to win with us or watch us win. I'm glad we've got a group in there that's winning with us.

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