

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - VCU vs Illinois

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Greenville, South Carolina, USA
Bon Secours Wellness Arena

VCU Rams

Phil Martelli Jr.

Terrence Hill Jr.

Brandon Jennings

Media Conference



gets down to the wire in tough games, like the last two games we had. The vision he preached to us, he followed through with it, and I'm just super grateful he gave us the opportunity to compete every day against each other in practice, and in the game he just let us play free and be ourselves, and I'm just thankful for that.

Q. For both of you, what does it mean having teammates like Barry and Jadrian? What can you say about how they've done for the team the whole season and what they've meant to you?

BRANDON JENNINGS: Yeah, they're great leaders, they're great teammates, and they had phenomenal years. They both come from different backgrounds and have different stories and I'm just glad to be a part of their journey, and I feel grateful to be with them.

TERRENCE HILL JR.: Yeah, like Brandon said, they're just amazing leaders, they were the head of the snake for us when it came to leadership and just energy as a team. They always got us going when we were down or we were up.

I feel like Ben was like a second coach for us, to be honest. Every time before Coach came in he was always getting on us in halftime or even in time-outs about what we need to do better. He was just that vocal leader that we needed.

Barry was kind of a Swiss Army Knife but a silent assassin as well, and like Brandon said, I'm grateful to be a part of their journey.

Q. I know basketball is about life lessons, and going through this experience of the Tournament, again, the highs and the lows, what did you learn about yourselves that you didn't know?

TERRENCE HILL JR.: I mean, I've always felt like I've always been a competitor but when you get in those moments when you get tested like the UNC game we were down 19, you kind of just challenge yourself, you think about all those moments you went through growing up about being down, any situation in life, like you said, and just finding that kind of joy and second gear, even when you're down or things are not going your way. I think I kind of found that by myself and I feel like I just proved myself

Illinois 76, VCU 55

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: The end is always hard, and you struggle to come up with what to say. I told these guys in the locker room the two words that kept kind of bouncing around in my mind were "pride" and "gratitude." All these guys took a chance, got the job 51 weeks ago today, and was selling everybody a vision, all of them a vision of what could be. They all took that chance. They came along for the ride, and they brought us along for the ride.

So my pride in them, my gratitude for them is through the roof.

Q. Brandon, you went through a coaching change, but as Coach said, 51 weeks ago he got the job. Just thoughts on the season as a whole?

BRANDON JENNINGS: I mean, it was a great year. This group of guys, this coaching staff, it was special, and like Coach said, we didn't know what we were getting ourselves into and we trusted Coach, and we balled out this year, and I'm just grateful to be a part of this program and have the year we had for sure.

Q. I wanted to follow up on what Coach's opening statement was about the vision. Based off of all the lessons that you learned through the highs and the lows of the season and just this game alone, how do you foresee that vision going forward?

TERRENCE HILL JR.: Just the vision he gave us early about how he wanted us to be competitors, like a tournament like this you have to be a competitor when it



right.

BRANDON JENNINGS: I would say the game is like play through your heart. There's runs all tournament for us. The first game we were down, we were never out of it, we fought back. In this game we made some runs, brought it back in that first half. You're never out of it, and just play your heart out for sure, every time.

Q. I wonder how much did Nyk's injury in the first minute of the game impact your strategy, everything else for the rest of the game?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, I mean, Nyk is a warrior. He's a winner. He's all those things. It certainly took the wind out of our sails to start, and we ended up getting it back, which was good.

But yeah, he's a key to what we do. But we aren't built around one guy. We are built as a team. But certainly what Nyk represents, who he is, the person he is, the player he is, all those things, you can't replicate.

But I feel terrible for him. He's worked so damn hard and done everything that we've ever asked him to do, and for him to go out like that is just a shame.

Q. Obviously not the outcome that the team wanted, but for you as a coach, you coached VCU first time as a head coach, and you made history. We haven't been to the second round since 2016. I'm wondering, what are you most proud of this team as it came to an end today?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, I mean, I'm just really proud of their resilience. I told them when we got together in June, we're not playing for good years. You have a good year and whatever that looks like and people come by and say, oh, it was a good year. That just stings to me. Like it just stings because there's greatness out there.

I asked these guys to chase greatness, and they did. 28 wins is great. A regular season championship is great. A conference tournament championship is great. An NCAA Tournament win is great. That's what they got. They got greatness.

They created just incredible memories for each other, and every time they walk in that Siegel Center they're going to see those banners hanging up there, and that means something, and the bond and the memories and all those things they created for themselves, for the fans, for the community, all those things will always be there and no matter what those can never be taken away from them.

I'm just proud of the way they took all that on and were able to get exactly what they deserved and get greatness.

Q. I asked you before Wagner what's one thing you wanted the people to know about this group of guys. Same question.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: What the hell was my answer? I don't remember back that far. Do you remember?

Q. No, I forgot --

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: You asked the question and didn't listen? You sound like my wife right now.

Q. I listened to it then but not today.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I'm just kidding.

Sorry, now I forgot the question.

Q. What's one thing you want the world to know about these guys, this team?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: That nine new guys coming into the program, four guys stayed in the program, but it was a whole new program, completely new staff, and this group came together. They found a connection. They found a belief in one another. They sacrificed for one another. And they became champions.

Again, that's with them forever. I hope people always remember that with this group.

Q. The players mentioned a little bit already, but they were able to make a run to get back into it and take the lead right there toward the end of the first half. What was the difference and what was the spark that allowed y'all to go on that run?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, I mean, we just -- the ball went in a couple times. We were missing shots that we've made most of the year. We were able to get some stops. That was where our brief transition opportunities came. We needed that. We needed more of that.

I thought in the first half we guarded well enough to hold them to whatever it was, 35 points. The percentages from two weren't where we would want them to be, but for the most part we guarded them well enough, we turned them over a few times. So it was really that. Like we were able to get some stops, get out in transition and the ball went in a couple times, like I said, and unfortunately there was too many open shots. We turned some down in the second half. We had some uncharacteristic turnovers.

I said to the staff as we got the stats after the game, I can't believe we only had 10 turnovers. It felt like we had 15 or 20 of them, just from kind of just, again, like game slippage, whatever it was.

But no, that was the run, and again, I expected it from these guys all the time. They're always going to fight back.

And I think we got our wind back with Nyk being out and now being comfortable with what was going on out there.

Q. Going into your second year with this VCU program, you had two key guys graduate but you have a very young team. What is it going to be like to have this foundation and moving forward after having to bring in most of the guys through the portal last year and having a brand new team?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, I think the biggest thing in college basketball today, and I go back to my year when it was the D-League, now it's the G-League, the first meeting we had as a staff, our GM said, the key in that league at that time was returning players.

That is exactly what is the key in college basketball, right? Returning players. You can supplement with some transfers, some freshmen. That's what makes this group so remarkable and special is that there really were no returning players. The four guys came back, but it was a whole new program.

That retention piece is huge. We're fortunate that we're at a place where I think our people believe in that. Dr. Rao our president, Ed McLaughlin, our athletic director, they understand that that's important, people matter. So we've got to keep those guys. That's got to be first and foremost.

I don't know why you wouldn't want to play in this program. You get a lot of freedom. We compete every day. Yesterday was practice 104 right in here, and we're doing player development. It doesn't happen most places. Most places this time of year it's like, hey, go in, walk through some stuff, get out. We're going player development and get the guys better. So we're always going to do that and we're going to win, no matter who's in that uniform.

For me, it's getting back, having those meetings with those guys and start talking about what the future looks like. These two guys that were just sitting here, they've won 56 games in two years. Eric Maynor won 98 in four years. That's the record. Go break that record and go get your number hanging in the rafters. What could be better than that? You're at a high-level program. Our guys are treated as well as any program in the country. Our practice facility

is off the charts. We travel really well. We do everything like a Power Four team, including with the guys we get.

We just have to continue with that. As I told you before, we need good players because the coaching is mediocre, the players are great.

Q. Coach, I'm going to ask you the same question I asked your guys. First year at VCU, what does it take away for yourself that you learned through this whole year as well as this tournament?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: That we can compete on the highest level, that VCU is built that way. In everything. Men's basketball, but every way, VCU is built to compete at the highest level, and we have to continue to push that forward.

I talk a lot about the people that came before us and what they've done to build this legacy. But it's really now. It's the people that are in charge and all of us, from Dr. Rao to Ed to me to all the administrators. We need to push this thing forward because this was great. It was great to be in the second round. But I think we all want more. I think we all know we can achieve more.

To me, this has to be the baseline, not the pinnacle. I talk a lot about to my teams -- I don't know if I ever really did it this year, but I talk to them about in previous years, like, there can be highlights along the way in the season, but you don't want your peak to be in November. You see teams that have a great win in November and that's the peak of their season. We never want that to be the case. We want to have great highlights in November, December, January, February, but we want the peak to be March. We got to the highest peak we could get to I think this year. It would have been nice to win tonight, but the reality is that team has got National Championship-level pedigree and I'll be rooting like hell for them to get there.

But that's what we have to strive for to compete with and keep pushing things forward. This has always been a forward-thinking program. It's always been a forward-thinking university. To me, that's where not quite yet but maybe in an hour or so or in two hours when I'm sitting in the hotel room, that's where my mind will go, is how do we push it forward. I hope everybody is on board with that. How do we push this even further forward, because we can.

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