

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Clemson vs Arizona

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Crypto.com Arena

Clemson Tigers

Coach Brad Brownell

Joseph Girard III

Chase Hunter

PJ Hall

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship West Regional here at Crypto.com Arena.

We will get our press conference started here with Clemson head coach Brad Brownell.

BRAD BROWNELL: Obviously really happy to be here. Proud of my team and the way that we played last week. I thought we had some terrific performances. Certainly we'll need one of those this next game against Arizona.

I've watched them a good bit throughout the year. Tommy's done an unbelievable job at Arizona here these last couple years. This team, like most, super dynamic offensively. Really good inside-out offense, a little bit like we play. We're very familiar with Caleb Love and obviously how good a player he is from his time at Carolina. I know it will be a raucous crowd with a lot of Arizona fans.

But we're super excited to be here. Our guys have worked really hard, and we're looking forward to the opportunity.

Q. Bas Leyte, what's it been like to kind of see him transform from a guy you're obviously hoping to have good minutes reserved as a team hype man.

BRAD BROWNELL: He's just a terrific kid. We knew that. We had Ben Middlebrooks leave in the transfer portal, and when you have a guy like PJ back, there's not going to be



a lot of minutes. So it's hard to recruit somebody to come in.

We told him it's going to be a 5- to 7-minute job, and he just wanted the opportunity to play at the high major level. Wants to be a coach. I think that really spoke to me. He's an unbelievable energy giver in terms of a person.

You know, it's unfortunate he's had some shoulder issues this year and won't be able to finish the season, but what he's meant just in terms of energy and positivity, tremendous. And to have a guy who cares about the team and just about the experience really helps keep us in a good place. And there were times this year when that wasn't easy.

Q. Brad, how much did the -- kind of propel you to this year, the support that you got from the administration last year after narrowly missing the tournament? But also Joe and PJ came out pretty emphatically and supported you after the Baylor game. How much did that mean to you?

BRAD BROWNELL: Yeah, it always means a lot when your players have your back. It's just special, right? I have tremendous relationships with my guys, and certainly PJ is somebody I've been -- I mean, I started recruiting him when he was probably 15, 16 years old. So we've been together forever. Competed against Joe.

I think it speaks to Joe's Clemson experience how much he's really enjoyed being a part of our program.

In terms of administrative support, I've been lucky. I've had great support for 14 years. I think we've had a consistent program. We'd like to have made the NCAA Tournament a couple more times. Last year was excruciatingly painful as we were one of the last teams left out. Happened to us in 2019 as well.

But we have had -- we've had some good teams. I've said this before, we're fifth in the ACC in wins over the last five to seven years. I don't think people would -- that would be a great bar question, right? We would not be somebody that people would think that. But we've been very



consistent. I think we have a lot of respect from the coaches in our league.

Again, it's what do you do in March? This is the biggest time of year. So in '18 we went to the Sweet 16. To be able to come back here in '24, I think, again, there's not as many programs as you would think that have been to a couple in the last seven years.

So we're moving the needle. We're continuing to try to push it forward. But I've been very fortunate in my 14 years at Clemson that I've had Graham Neff, who is my third athletic director. And we have a great relationship and have had for a long time. He was the number two man for a long time under Dan Radakovich, and he was my sports supervisor, so we've been close.

I'm extremely grateful for that and having had the opportunity as long as I have to be able to coach at a place I really enjoy.

Q. Considering that you made the Sweet 16 in 2018 but a lot of players on this roster maybe don't have experience playing this deep in the tournament, what's been the message this week?

BRAD BROWNELL: Yeah, don't just be happy to be here. We talked -- at one point during the season, I think it was in January, when we were struggling, I had a really hard meeting with our players. I told them I was -- we were teetering a little bit. We had an unbelievable November and December.

We were, I don't know if it's just so excited to play, and we played a really hard schedule, and we won a bunch of games. We had, like, no adversity, and we were 10-1 and playing great.

Then came back from Christmas and got smacked in the mouth by some teams in our league. And had a hard time stringing some games together. We lost a bunch of close games, one-point games.

At one point I told our team, I think we were 4-6 in the ACC, and I said, guys, we need to understand something. I think some of you guys think we're the 10-1 team. Right now we're the 4-6 team. If we go 4-6 again, we won't be playing in the NCAA Tournament. I said, that would be a shame because of what you did the first two months of the year, but also because I think we're good enough to go to the Final Four.

That's not something that I throw around easily. I asked my older players, have you ever heard me say that to you? And they said no. I know my 2018 team, I said the same

thing to them. I thought we were good enough to do it.

But obviously we're going to have to finish the season the right way. And we played better, still a little inconsistent at times. But I do think there's a belief our guys have that we're pretty good. And when we're clicking, we can play with anybody in the country. We've proven that. We've beat some of the teams in this tournament. So I think that's a big part of it.

But these seasons are so long. They're almost too long, to be honest with you. We start practicing in September, and now we're at the end of March. You're going to have ups and downs. You're going to have some times that don't go well, and you've got to respond.

Q. Josh Beadle, he didn't play against Baylor, and I think he logged three minutes against New Mexico. What has caused his minutes to go down?

BRAD BROWNELL: Nothing he's done. It's just been coach's decision based on how other guys have played. We've gone with our starters more, more experienced players in these big-time games.

Q. Obviously you don't want the road to end here, but what can you say just about having four teams here representing the ACC in the Sweet 16?

BRAD BROWNELL: Yeah, I've been pretty outspoken that -- I've been in our league 14 years. So I knew the quality of play that we had this year. I thought we were extremely deep. I told everybody before the ACC Tournament that I wouldn't be shocked if a higher seed team won -- or lower seed, however you want to look at it. And NC State won our tournament.

I just think that there's great parity in our league, and it seems for whatever reason -- I think because we have a lot of different styles of play in our league that, when we get to the NCAA Tournament, we've kind of seen everything. Our teams adjust and seem to play very well this time of year.

Certainly there's a tremendous amount of pride with our coaches and players that the ACC is performing as well as it is. Again, I don't think that any of us are surprised by that.

Q. I think Arizona got back home about 6:00 p.m. on Saturday. You guys played Sunday night. I was wondering, did you go home to Clemson? And what was that short turnaround like?

BRAD BROWNELL: We had a less than ideal probably -- we got home at 3:30 in the morning on Sunday. Then kind



of realized we play on Thursday. So we'd better get back out to California. We chartered a plane, and we had to drive an hour to Greenville. So we left campus at 4:00. We were really only home about 12 hours.

Yesterday was a little challenging. We practiced, but it wasn't easy. Just trying to get our legs back, just get used to the time change and all of that. I'm optimistic we'll be ready to go tomorrow. But it's been a quick turnaround, that's for sure. A lot of sleepless nights for the staff trying to get ready.

Q. Brad, I'm wondering the NCAA president said today that they're going to start working on some kind of plan to ban prop bets on individual players. And I'm wondering do you have an opinion on that? And also whether you've seen any of your players get harassed or bothered, either at home or on the road, about stats or things like that this season?

BRAD BROWNELL: I haven't seen it personally. It wouldn't shock me. People are extremely aggressive these days. We get phone calls in our office sometimes. When things obviously don't go a better's way, we get some nasty calls. I know players probably get that through social media. Obviously I'm for that.

It's a really unique time with everything going on in college athletics, and now the gambling piece is a whole nother log on the fire.

It's really, this is so special, this whole experience as a young person is so special, that I know it's professionalizing in a lot of ways, and I'm a little more old school, but it worries me tremendously, and that's another thing to be worried about.

Q. Joseph Girard is having a career year from the 3-point line and the free-throw line. With him being a graduate student, did you guys help him with his average? Or is that just Joe being Joe?

BRAD BROWNELL: I think it's a combination. I think his experience certainly helps, his poise, his swagger, the fact he's been in all these moments. He's been in every kind of situation you can be in as a player. He's got that inner belief that you can't coach.

But then I also think we've done a good job as a staff and players of putting him in positions to be successful. He certainly has capitalized on that.

Q. Expanding on Joe, how much has he meant to the program, just coming from Syracuse and somebody who you watched for four years?

BRAD BROWNELL: Yeah, he's meant a lot. We knew we had a good team coming back -- Chase, Ian, PJ especially. We had three really good players. We lost Hunter Tyson, who's playing for the Denver Nuggets, and Brevin Galloway, two starters.

And we wanted a wing with size, so we went out and got Jack Clark, somebody who could defend and rebound. Then we wanted some scoring because Hunter was a first-team all-league, scoring-type guy.

What I'm really proud of is I think the guys within our program opened the -- brought the transfers in with open arms. And I think that that's maybe a bigger deal than people realize. It's great to want to bring in a bunch of transfers, but the guys in your program have got to be up for that too or you're going to have bad chemistry issues.

We haven't had that. PJ and Chase, I think, recruited Joe about as hard as we could to get him here partly because we knew what kind of player he was and that he was going to be a good fit. And I think Joe having competed against our team for four years in the same league had a good feel for how we play and seen guys in our program be successful, liked our style, and figured this would be a good place for him.

Q. Asking about the front court, what do you face in Arizona with Ballo and Krivas and Johnson?

BRAD BROWNELL: Yeah, they're tremendous. They've got a lot of really good players. Certainly what you're impressed with is they have balance. They play with pace. They certainly have an inside presence. They go right to Ballo on the high-low right away on almost every single possession.

Johnson is super athletic, competitive, tough, beat you off the bounce, can make a 3. Can guard 5 men. He does everything, switches on the guards.

They just, as you would expect the team who's had as much success as they have, top 10 team throughout the year, they've got a lot of really good players. They've got experience both on the perimeter and in the post.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

Joining us on stage is Chase Hunter, Joseph Girard III and PJ Hall.

Q. Question for you, Joe. You're having a career high in 3-point shooting and free-throw percentage. How have you refined your shot entering this fifth season to



most of those averages?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: Just being consistent in the gym, trying to work out as much as I can. I think too I obviously had some great teammates at Syracuse, great teams, and a great system. Some of those guys are even in the NBA.

Just a new system. It's a different kind of offense where there's a lot of other great players around me who can do different things that kind of make my job a lot easier.

It's just, like I said, a lot of credit goes to the system that Coach Brownell has here and obviously the players around me who take a lot of pressure off me to kind of just focus on maybe sometimes an easier catch and shoot than I've had before.

Q. Joe, PJ, you came out emphatically and supported your coach after Sunday's win over Baylor. Just what caused you guys to do that? Was it just stuff that popped up over the year and just getting in the Sweet 16?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I mean, we're all online nowadays on social media. You see a lot of the things that people might say about players, coaches, teams, whatever it may be. Us as players, obviously didn't end the season the way we wanted to against a few teams and lost some pretty bad games and pretty badly. A lot of times Coach Brownell is the one getting heckled for it.

We just wanted to show we had support for him. Obviously he's been here for 14 years, one of the better ones in the ACC. We just wanted to show support because getting into the Sweet 16 is not easy, and to have him leading us here is a pretty good job.

PJ HALL: Yeah, a lot of the same. It's the second Sweet 16 in seven years. Over the past six or seven years, he's also one of the winningest coaches in the ACC, and he's like top six winning coach in the league.

There's a lot of credit that he is due and doesn't get. So playing for him for four years and being a South Carolina kid, whenever someone goes after somebody who you've been playing for, it's not fun or easy. So, being able to win for him and continue on this run is special.

Q. What made you ultimately choose Clemson and just be welcomed immediately and just how things have gone this year?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I think just being comfortable with them and familiar with them for four years, played against them a bunch of times. I kind of knew the system and the

familiarity, knew how much these guys liked playing for each other. I had a little bit of connection to Coach Donlon back when he was at Michigan from my high school days. So I was familiar with him.

When Coach Donlon and Coach Brownell came for an in-home visit, they were bragging about the locker room and how great these guys were to each other and how much they really enjoyed playing together. That was something I wanted for my last year. I also knew how great of a team they had last year, and a lot of those guys were coming back.

I had one shot at it, to get back to a moment like this, to get back to a Sweet 16 like I did my sophomore year. And I felt these guys gave me the best chance. They've been nothing short of the best teammates I've ever had.

Q. PJ, Chase, why has Joe been a fit? Why is a fifth-year guy coming from Syracuse, why has he fit so well in the room?

CHASE HUNTER: I think it's because he's a great player and a great guy. He came on a visit, and we immediately clicked. I told him that I wanted the best for both of us when he came. I was glad when he committed.

But I think the biggest thing, like he said, is we're all great players, and we all want to see each other win. When that's on the court, you can see it.

PJ HALL: Obviously there's a lot of stuff that speaks to his game, with the shooting and play-making ability. It's not going to work out if you're not a good dude. Coming on his visit the first time and staying here for a couple of days and just meshing with the guys right away. We all knew that he was perfect for our culture and our program. It's been nothing short of that.

We get out and play golf a good bit whenever we're not in season and we have a good time. Whenever you're able to connect with somebody that fast and that easy, you know it's a good fit for the team.

Q. Coach had mentioned that you guys had a familiarity with playing Caleb Love before, and you guys have all had experience playing against him too. And him having one of his best seasons, how are you guys approaching the familiarity aspect of facing him? And then also how he's been able to elevate his game this season.

PJ HALL: Star player for sure. He's definitely come into his own this year. He's having a great year, one of his best statistics years as well. It's incredible to watch. I can kind

of keep track of him from afar after playing against him for a couple of years.

Other than that, there's a lot of good players on that team. One thing we've done these past three games is try to make guys uncomfortable, try to make guys get out of a rhythm. I think that's kind of the same thing for this game. I think that speaks in general for all games when you go against a great player like that. You've just got to try to limit his chances.

Q. PJ, Arizona likes to go to Ballo a lot, and they like to move the pace, fast pace very well. For you, you got into foul trouble in the last game. What are some keys for you to be successful in this game?

PJ HALL: Probably just not put myself in positions to get those early fouls and dumb fouls. I do my work early and make sure I'm putting myself in positions to succeed, fighting early and stuff like that.

Also, as corny as it sounds, sticking to your fundamentals. Not using your hands, using your elbows and forearms and stuff and make sure you're not grabbing. All the stupid stuff that gets you those dumb fouls, try to stay away from that.

Q. Chase and Joe, kind of bouncing off that, Arizona plays at such a high-level pace, they move the ball up-and-down quickly. How do you guys plan to neutralize Kylan Boswell, Caleb Love and those guys?

CHASE HUNTER: Just making things hard for him. Make sure they're not getting the easy looks, making sure we're closing out hard on them, not letting them get in the lane.

The thing is they've got to guard us too. Making things hard for them offensively as well. Like I said, just making things hard for them, not letting them get some easy open looks early.

JOSEPH GIRARD III: Chase hit it right on the head. Not letting the guys get easy ones early because that's when a basketball player gets a lot of confidence. Those guys are, like you said, great players. When you let a great player get confidence early, it's usually a struggle for us on the defense. We're just going to have to be locked in early and make sure there's nothing easy.

Q. PJ and Joe, how do you think the team has responded after a sloppy end to the regular season and the ACC Tournament to now playing in the Sweet 16?

PJ HALL: Yeah, great. It's funny, like, you hear that a lot.

Obviously the last game we played, it was more than sloppy, it was terrible. Wash that, wash that outlier.

Leading into that, even though we had a couple of losses at the end of the season, we were playing some of our best ball, and people tend to overlook that. We had won a good amount of games leading into the Notre Dame game. And then had a couple guys out and ended up having a tough loss at Wake, even though when you go back and watch the film, our defense was pretty solid overall. They hit a lot of tough shots.

Coming into the tournament, I think Coach said it the other day, we had a pretty quiet confidence about ourselves. We had a lot of people talking about us, saying -- we were picked I'm pretty sure we were under, we were the underdog for the first time. It was kind of a slap in the face.

So, you go into that having a quiet confidence and chip on your shoulder knowing we can come in here and make some noise has been our attitude. Keeping that confidence is huge.

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I think, yeah, I said it last week, we just kind of want to get our competitive edge back. And that week of practice from -- again, you've got to try and take a positive from every negative. We lost that game to BC, but it gave us nine days until we had to play again. We had a lot of practices, a lot of time in the gym together, a lot of meetings, a lot of film.

It kind of just gave us an opportunity to get that competitive spirit back that we had earlier in the season when we were winning a bunch of games. It gave us a lot of confidence going into the early games here in the tournament.

Like Coach says, you've got to try to bottle that momentum up as best as you can and keep it moving forward.

Q. Joe, what's it like being back in the Sweet 16? You made it with Syracuse. What's it like being back here with Clemson?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: It's unbelievable, man. That was one of the things in the transfer portal that I was really looking forward to was finding a team that I could get back here because there is no feeling like playing in March.

These guys are unbelievable, the way they brought me in. And they obviously have an unbelievable culture, unbelievable system, unbelievable players and coaches.

It's unreal, man, and it's a dream come true honestly. I'm so thankful to be back here, but hoping to make it even farther this time.

Q. Coach had mentioned the power of the ACC, getting four teams into the Sweet 16. You guys faced them all season. When the conference was kind of not getting the love that it usually gets this season, does it surprise you guys to see four ACC schools make the Sweet 16 at all?

PJ HALL: No, not in the least bit. It's funny, like, that's happened every year. I don't know about four teams, but a couple of years ago we had three in the Elite Eight, two in the Final Four. Every year we get not enough respect and disrespected all year -- the conference is down -- and then we come here and start waxing people.

The ACC is as good as it's ever been. I don't know about that, but a lot of great coaches, a lot of great players, NBA-type players.

That's what I like in the nonconference, you come back in the in-conference, and everybody is like, oh, it's imploding on itself. No, it's because we have a lot of good teams from 16 to 1, or however many teams there are. There's definitely not a dip in talent.

THE MODERATOR: Chase, PJ, Joseph, thank you.

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