

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024
Charlotte, North Carolina, USA
Spectrum Center

Wagner Seahawks
Donald Copeland
Julian Brown
Javier Ezguerra
Melvin Council Jr.
Media Conference

North Carolina - 90, Wagner - 62

THE MODERATOR: In lieu of an opening statement, we'll take a couple of questions for Coach Copeland.

Q. Congrats on a great run. What was this like for you and for your program to be on the stage and within 10 or 12 points of North Carolina with ten minutes left?

DONALD COPELAND: It was big for me, definitely coaching-wise. These guys here because they feel they belong here. I think they worked to put themselves in this position, and then to play in this type of atmosphere obviously was flooded with North Carolina fans, as you would expect.

I was happy for them to be able to compete in this, and I was really proud the way they competed. Obviously what we've gone through all year isn't ideal, but we expected to play well. We expected to win the game. Obviously we didn't. But I'm glad the way we played.

Q. Donald, there's been some talk of eliminating auto bids for mid-majors. What would you say about the importance of having programs like Wagner on this stage? What it means to you, what it means to all schools of that nature.

DONALD COPELAND: I don't necessarily agree with that. I think Wagners and schools of this level make the tournament, just as any other high major or blue blood program. It's a chance to compete. We're all under one



flag.

Obviously we all know the differences in conferences and that nature. But what makes the NCAA Tournament is the fact that it's a one-game season every game and anything can happen and anything's possible. So it gives meaning to your season. Everyone's playing for a championship.

I think, if you win a championship in your conference, you should have the right to compete on a national stage with everybody else.

Q. Julian, you were playing against a high school teammate tonight, Elliot. What was that like for two Bergen Catholic guys to be going at it on a stage like this?

JULIAN BROWN: It's a blessing. You don't see that often, with two high school teammates meet at the college level, playing on one of the biggest stages of the world. I am super proud of him. He's like a little brother to me. After the game I told him, Go win the rest of this tournament.

I'm super proud of him. I love him. It was great to compete against him today, and I'm super proud of him.

Q. This is for any and all of the players. What's this experience been like for you? What has this done for you and for Wagner basketball?

JAVIER EZQUERRA: It's been amazing. This is like a dream come true. This is what everybody dreams, every kid that plays basketball wants to play at this level. I'm just blessed. I wouldn't be here without God, so I just want to thank Him.

JULIAN BROWN: First and foremost, I would like to thank the Man upstairs for allowing us to have this opportunity to play at this level and compete against the best college players in the world.

I would like to thank my coach for always believing in us even when we have seven players, giving us confidence, giving us momentum coming into this tournament and even back in the conference tournament.



I couldn't have done it without my teammates, my coaches, the staff, the school. I give all the credit to them because without them I don't think we would be here. So kudos to them.

Q. For each of the student-athletes, the NEC, just what you were able to do in the conference this year to even make this a possibility to play in the NCAA Tournament. Just what you can say about the Northeast Conference, the level of competition, and reflecting on the positivity that got you here.

JULIAN BROWN: It's a great conference. Everybody is trying to compete for an NEC championship. All the teams are competing. It was tough for us having seven guys and having played them twice and maybe three times in the playoffs. So it's a really tough conference.

People probably look at it and say, oh, it's a small conference. It's not the ACC or SEC, but I can compare -- I can go down the line to one of those teams, and those teams could be a high major team. It's not just a small conference.

Look at us. We made it to March Madness. What makes you think another NEC couldn't make it, you know what I'm saying? I put respect on the NEC because it's a very tough conference.

MELVIN COUNCIL JR.: Like Julian said, it's tough, but Coach preached toughness. That's what we did, we ran through the conference and came out NEC champs.

JAVIER EZQUERRA: Like they said, it's a tough conference. Everybody is trying to make the tournament. Only one team makes it.

Q. Donald, what happened this month, how can this impact your program going forward? How can you build off this?

DONALD COPELAND: I think it helps in a positive way for sure. This has always been the expectation, whether we've had difficult seasons or some of the successful seasons we've had, there's always been an expectation of winning an NEC conference and then having the chance to compete.

So it's nice to be able to do that, and it definitely gives the program something to continue to strive for and hopefully try to get better.

Because you have to get better. You can't just do it the same way. It's good to finally get this done and now raise

expectations.

Q. Are you sticking around to watch Bash and St. Peter's?

DONALD COPELAND: I would love to. I don't know our schedule off the top of my head. He and I have spoken. If it's possible, I would. I would like to.

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