

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oregon vs South Carolina

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

**South Carolina Gamecocks**

**Ta'lon Cooper**

**Meechie Johnson**

**B.J. Mack**

**Coach Lamont Paris**

Media Conference



transferring in, what was it about Lamont when you guys had an opportunity to go through the recruiting process that said, hey, you know what, I believe in this vision to be able to get South Carolina in the position that you guys are in this week?

B.J. MACK: It's been the honesty that he had with us up front, just telling us what he sees for the team, and then what our personal goals are lined up. So just throughout this whole year it has just been a perfect match for all of us, and we've just been putting in the work since.

**Q. Meechie and Ta'Lon, you guys have experienced the NCAA Tournament before. How have you helped the guys on the rest of the team to know what to expect tomorrow?**

TA'LON COOPER: Yeah. Well, when I came, it was during COVID. So I didn't get the full experience, but just to tell them just to embrace the moment. We're on the big stage, going to play in front of a good group of crowd. So just embrace the moment and go out there and have fun and play basketball.

**Q. B.J., what do you see from N'Faly Dante on Oregon, and kind of what's the game plan of stopping him or containing him?**

B.J. MACK: Yes. Dante is a great player. He's one of the leading scorers for their team, for Oregon, their best rebounder. He tries a lot to get great post position, get to his right hand for the hook. So just pretty much not allow him to get easy catches, and just trying to push him out, trying to get offensive rebounds. We know they feed off of that and try to get out in transition. So he's a big key factor in that.

**Q. Ta'Lon, you mentioned a second ago about the first time you came to the tournament you didn't get to experience a lot of things that are happening now because of COVID. Is there anything in particular that has struck you about this experience so far, something that you're looking forward to that maybe you didn't get a few years ago?**

MODERATOR: Questions for student-athletes.

**Q. Ta'Lon, obviously you've been around college basketball a long time, Morehead to Minnesota to here. Where do you think you've grown the most as a player from when you first started playing college basketball to now and how has that helped you and your team this season?**

TA'LON COOPER: I would say just become more of a leader. Coming in as a freshmen I had a great group of guys around me and from there I just developed as the point guard -- tuned into the point guard role, which helped me lead these guys and keep them calm and poised throughout the game. So just being a leader throughout my career.

**Q. Meechie, you've talked a lot the last two years about this was always the goal, this was why you came to South Carolina. I know you've been here half a day, you haven't played a game yet, but what has the tournament experience been like so far since you've been here?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: It's been a blessing to be here with these guys. We've been working, putting a lot of work in. We believe we can be in this moment and since being here we've had a lot of fun, bonding, watching film, went to dinner, enjoying every moment we can, making memories.

**Q. For either of you guys, being able to believe in Lamont, Meechie, we've talked about it before,**



TA'LON COOPER: Yeah, just the crowd. I mean, being able to play in front of a big group of crowd means just getting your blood going. So that's what I'm most excited about.

**Q. Meechie, when you found out you get to come this close to home and play, obviously you guys were excited just to make the tournament, to be a part of this of this. But when you found out it's going to be Pittsburgh, as close to Cleveland as you could be, what went through your mind? What has it been like in terms of the family and friends who I'm sure are wanting to be a part of this for you?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: It felt good. Like, I said before, I kind of already knew it. Like, I knew God was going to make this play out how I wanted it to. I got a lot of family and friends coming down to support. Haven't got to play in front of them since high school. So just being able to see all them come to the game is going to be a blessing. And I got a good group of guys around me that's going to be there working hard throughout the whole game trying to win. So it's exciting.

**Q. Meechie and Ta'Lon, obviously a lot of focus on Jermaine Couisnard being a former Gamecock. What do you see on the film from him and is there a guard that you've faced in the SEC this year that's kind of similar to how he plays?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: He's a good player. Still watch a lot of tape on him. Obviously he's a good player, played here before. Don't know too much about him, but we'll see how it goes tomorrow.

TA'LON COOPER: Yeah, he's a good downhill driver, can shoot the three ball real good. But I couldn't compare him to anybody in the SEC. He just plays his own game and gets to his spots.

**Q. When Lamont talks, he seems to have such a passion for basketball, but is there something about Lamont outside of basketball we don't know about him, something you guys have grown to love about him over the last couple months?**

B.J. MACK: Nah, Coach Paris, he's a big jokester. That's what we call him the People's Coach because, you know, he relates a lot to a lot of people. So just him having that capability to relate to a lot of people and show a different side that you don't really see probably from a lot of coaches just shows the great person that he is.

TA'LON COOPER: You know, B.J. took everything that I was going to say, but I don't know. Coach Paris is just a

great guy in general, just a great guy to be around, great guy to talk to. There's not really much to say about him. He's just a great guy at the end of the day.

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think he's just a great coach and off the court he's a regular guy. You see him walking in with his Taco Bell bag, Starbucks, coffee in the morning. But he just watches film all day. Basketball is what he loves, and he studies it. I call him like a doctor of the game. He really knows the game and he makes it simple for you, so all around just a great guy.

**Q. Meechie, for you, when we talk about being able to buy into a system, especially the system that's so much different than maybe what other programs run across the country, what do you think allowed this team this year to be able to buy in so quickly to what Lamont is trying to do when maybe other players wouldn't want to play in this system?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, Lamont, he allows you to play your game. With that, when you have great guys you can build a great team, which the coaching staff did this year. We just played for each other. That's all it's about. We said before, as you've seen all year, it's been different guys' nights, 25 for this guy, 25 for that guy, and next day it's somebody different and we're all happy at the end of the day because we're winning and now we're in this position. This is about buying in and winning and that's the main goal and everybody eats at the end of the day.

**Q. B.J., you guys obviously have a lot of older talent on this team, but Collin is a guy who's certainly come in and made a pretty big splash as a freshmen. What has it been like for you just watching him develop just as a college player, in a practice setting, throughout the course of the season and what does he bring to your team?**

B.J. MACK: Collin has been bringing in a lot of great energy. You've seen the work that he's been able to put in since coming back early in the season. So just the work that he's put in just to be able to get back, coming in doing two-a-days to get back right to try to catch up to speed with us. So it's just been a blessing just to see that. You don't really see a lot of freshmen coming in making a big impact like he has so far. So we're happy to have him and for him to be healthy and for him be able to get on the run that he's doing.

**Q. B.J., you guys play in arguably the best conference in America. Can you talk just a little bit about the physicality of the conference and how that's helped you guys develop your games?**

B.J. MACK: Yes. SEC is probably the most physical conference. So playing against guys that are 7', 7'5" that we played against twice this year. So just having that goal against them and then going into a tournament type of play you kind of get a little bit of advantage seeing how the refs are going to call things. Playing in different cities and across the country, it might be different. Some places you might play might be more physical. Others might not. So we kind of had a good balance of that playing out west where they play kind of a more finesse style and then playing in the SEC where it's more physical and brutal. So just I just feel like that's a good balance between it.

**Q. Oregon, for like the first couple months of the season seems like a very different team than what we were in the Pac-12 Tournament. How do you guys balance watching film of what they did throughout the body of work of the season or do you just kind of focus on what they did the most recent games?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: I mean, yeah. Obviously you want to be playing the best basketball right now. So we're honestly looking at that, seeing what they're doing. They're a great team, got great pieces, but we have honestly grown, too. And they gotta see us tomorrow, too. So it's just a match up. You know what I'm saying, the match up, it's March Madness. It will be fun and you go from there.

TA'LON COOPER: Yeah, we watched film on their recent games and they're playing some really good basketball right now. But also they haven't faced our defense. So we'll put that to test tomorrow.

B.J. MACK: Yeah. Just kind of looking back at their games earlier, you gotta see a lot of like how they've grown, how the pace of play that they played from earlier to now. But they're playing great basketball right now. So you really want to focus in on really how they're playing right now.

MODERATOR: Questions for coach Paris.

**Q. Lamont, obviously you saw a lot of stuff on film that made you want to bring Ta'Lon Cooper into the program, but can you speak to the growth of what you've seen on film, on tape beginning of the season to this point now where he's able to be a fifth year leader for an NCAA Tournament team with high hopes?**

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah. Growth has kind of been our thing all season for a lot of guys, but oftentimes you think about young guys when you think about that, just because typically they have the most room for growth. And it's harder for a guy that's in his fifth year to grow as much.

But Ta'Lon has grown tremendously in a lot of different ways. You know, offensively, as a shooter he's been really consistent. I think in his last year at Minnesota he had good numbers overall as a shooter, but it was -- started off the season with a bang and kind of just crept through it towards the end, where he's been really, really consistent as a shooter.

I think where the most growth has happened with him is on the defensive side of things. He's had some moments defensively where he's had some matchups and guys were being really aggressive and he's done some really, really good things for us defensively. I think we've created an environment where he and some other guys also have grown as leaders. They've been able to lead and have conversations and express themselves with words in an environment where that's encouraged and where it's not just a bunch of guys throwing darts at guys. Right? They get enough of that by way of social media, you think about it. If they put on social media the new shoes that they're wearing or what they had for dinner, somebody is going to throw a couple darts at it and say that's the worst pair of shoes I ever saw. So we've created an environment where they feel comfortable doing that and he's been one of the guys that have really used that as an opportunity to grow.

**Q. You talked a lot about growth, Coach, specifically over the course of the season. What have you seen from Collin and his ability to work low in the post, and grow his footwork ability over the course of the season?**

LAMONT PARIS: Well, there's growth and then there's whatever the word that you would use metamorphosis possibly. You know, sometimes you go into a cocoon and you look like a worm, caterpillar or whatever it is, and then you come out and you look like a butterfly or a moth. And so that to me is metamorphosis, which is another whole level of growth. And that's what Collin has done. When you think about how far he was behind due to mononucleosis, he had an incredibly productive summer for us. He completely changed his body going into his senior year and a lot of people might not know the commitment and dedication that it took for him to do that. For him to change his eating habits and being consistent with his cardiovascular development and all that kind of stuff. So then to come into college and to contract mononucleosis and then go backwards, I think he lost 20 to 25 pounds at one point. So from that first time that he was physically able to compete in a college game to who he is right now, it's metamorphosis. I mean, he was out there just trying to affect the game as a rebounder and as an active player. Now we run some offense through him. He scores with little effort. His ceiling is so incredibly high, it's really hard to put it into perspective because he's still not

there. As crazy as that is, he's still nowhere near the player that he's going to be, but he's grown quite a bit throughout this whole season.

**Q. You said on Sunday you hadn't seen much of Oregon this year. Now that you've watched the tape, what stands out about them and is there maybe an SEC team you've faced that's similar to Oregon in terms of style and what they're going to bring?**

LAMONT PARIS: Not necessarily. I don't know that there's a good comp in our league or even anyone on our schedule that we played that would really work to prepare us for what they do. But they're really talented. You want to talk about growth, they've had a lot of growth as a team, too. Due to injury and whatnot, they've had a lot of different lineups and guys in and out.

But if you look at the history of Dana Altman's teams, this is the time that they put it together, and so they've done that once again. But it's a very versatile team. They can score in a variety of ways. I mean, they can beat you up on the inside. They also have some accomplished scorers on the perimeter. They're capable of shooting the ball. But what they really do is attack aggressively, and they're really effective at that.

But talented team that is also playing their best basketball right now. And I keep saying that. I think when you get into the NCAA Tournament, you're going up against a team that's really talented, or you're going up against a team that's extremely hot, or sometimes you go up against a team that's both of those things. And so you have to be -- you have to play well. You know, you have to play well this time of year, and certainly they are playing well.

**Q. Another question about Collin for you. I'm curious, what has he been like in his first year collegiately just in terms of his coachability, willingness to learn, asking questions, things of that nature, and what are some of the keys for him to continue to elevate his game?**

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah, he's been extremely coachable. That's one of the strengths of our team. We've been extremely coachable this year as a unit, and he has been really coachable. I'll tell you what he does more so than the typical true freshmen is he accepts responsibility. Doesn't mean he always gets it right. He doesn't. But he always accepts responsibility. He rarely shirks responsibility when something happens on the play and you point out, he will take responsibility for it. And then I think by acknowledging those things and accepting responsibility, then you're more apt to try to change what you did that last time versus the next time. And I think

that's a key to him being able to continue to grow throughout this whole thing.

But extremely coachable. But in terms of next stuff for him, you know, maybe 365 days we'll be back here and I'll look like Nostradamus, but he's got such good touch, Collin does, that there's a world where we're running plays for him to shoot the ball from the perimeter. We could ball screen for him, which we haven't really done that. I'm telling you, the guy's ceiling, who knows when he gets there, but the guy's ceiling is really high. But I think in terms of growth, those would be the next things that would be able to unlock another level of productivity for him as a basketball player.

**Q. With so many new faces on this team this year, we talk so much about from a coaching standpoint a coach comes in, players earning your trust, but it works both ways in sports. What do you think has allowed this team to trust you and believe in what you envisioned, especially after being here just two years and after the year you guys had in the transition year your first year?**

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah, I think some of it starts in the recruiting process when you show what you're about. And after a year like last year -- and last year was my first year here -- you have to use vision. They have to trust in your vision. So some of it is how you frame the vision up and what have you done in your career and in your history. These are things that I like, these are things that I value. You do those things well. Also, if you look back at my track record, teams that I've been around have been extremely good with those values, and you fit right in there. And so I think that's what it is that initially earns their trust. I think they trust your plan and how it fits their vision. I think that's the first level of trust that has to happen. Then when you get here and those things are aligning up the exact way, trust is emboldened even more. And then I think when they spend time around you and they hear you say the things that you say, I don't think there's one guy on our team that believes this whole process is about me. I don't think there's one guy on our team that thinks that for a second. And so because they know you're about them and you're here for them, then I think it's pretty easy to get them to trust you and you're telling the truth and they believe that it's the truth. And once you start playing games and there's success, then it's a little bit easier to do that at that point.

But I think the big part once they get here is that they have to know one way or another when all the dust settles and the smoke clears that you are for them. And again, I don't think there's any one guy on our team that doesn't believe that wholeheartedly.

**Q. You've had so many NCAA Tournament experiences as an assistant. Is there something that Keith or Bo Ryan or even Greg Gard did that you take with you now when you bring teams to the NCAA Tournament, and is there a way you mesh all the different things you liked about the way those guys handled it that you take with your team now?**

LAMONT PARIS: Here's what I'll say. I think for the most part at all those places, all the great coaches that I've been blessed to be around and work with, I think it's what we did leading up to the tournament, whether that was conference tournament, NCAA Tournament, NIT, any sort of postseason play. I think it's by and large all the things that we did leading up to it that made it to where you were bound to have postseason tournament success because everything to the guys was kind of the same, even though none of it's the same. None of it's the same. Their families aren't going to act the same. People that have never come to a game are going to travel to a game because it's the NCAA Tournament. Nothing is the same. There's more media. There is more scrutiny. None of it's the same. But in all those places we have prepared so consistently, and I think that's part of the reason why this team has had a lot of success away from home, because we've prepared so consistently that performing, and that's what you want to do is get out there and perform, is -- it happens a little -- it's a little easier to get through the other stuff to just getting down to the nuts and bolts of playing basketball, having fun and then performing.

**Q. Obviously Ta'Lon and Stute were battling some injuries on the SEC. I wondered if you could provide an update on those guys.**

LAMONT PARIS: I think there's been good progress on behalf of each of those guys. I think Myles Stute, his injury was a little more significant in that he had to miss some game time. But he's made some good progress. So I expect him to be available at some level. We'll see what that looks like in terms of what percentage of his usual self he is in terms of mobility, in terms of absorbing contact and being able to continue to play the way that he needs to to be an effective piece for us.

And then Ta'Lon was the same. I think he's at a pretty high percentage of full health, and he'll be ready to go.

**Q. You had three other guys up there before you and they all seemed so calm and collected and I've watched you in big games and I guess I want to know what is the secret? I know the players feed off their coach. What is your secret of staying so calm?**

LAMONT PARIS: You know, I think it leads back to what I just was saying in the other question. So much of my belief and our belief comes down to our preparation and what is happening in our preparation and our conviction in what we do, are belief in how it works out for us to win and the reproducibility of those things. I don't think we have to break any records in terms of three point field goal percentage in order to have success. I think when you have such a belief in your process, such a belief in your system, such a belief in your guys, that's me in them and that's them in me and what we do. That I think there's no real overreacting. There's no real overreacting. You know, stuff's going to happen. That's just the way it is. And the sooner you can accept that it happened and figure out what the next thing is to do and maybe how to prevent it from happening again. What the new normal, that was a phrase that we were all getting accustomed to, wasn't it, a couple years ago? Whatever that ends up being in a college basketball game, whether that's our starting point guard or center has his fourth foul with nine minutes left, well, what's the new normal now and how do we do that and what does it do? I think the belief in all that stuff allows you to handle those things, and I just had never really been an overreactor, on game day in particular. You know, at practice there's some times I'll turn it up. But I need the result. And we need something to happen the rest of the practice. You know, on game day guys gotta play. They gotta feel good about themselves, you know. I do a lot of teaching. I always use the analogy, you know, if you're in calculus class and you're not understanding how to do something in your calculus class, I'm not sure your teacher screaming at a different volume makes you learn it better. So, you know, I'll turn up when guys are not trying, when they're doing things that they know they're not supposed to do. But they really try hard to do what we ask them to do, so there's not a lot of that. Honestly, we get out there and we play. Stuff happens. Some of it's good, a lot of it's good, usually. Some if it's not so good and then we gotta pivot and make an adjustment based on what's out there and I think you gotta have a cool, calm mind in order to be able to do that.

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