

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

## South Carolina Gamecocks Coach Lamont Paris Ta'Lon Cooper Meechie Johnson

Media Conference

Oregon - 87, South Carolina - 73

MODERATOR: Opening statement from head coach Lamont Paris.

LAMONT PARIS: Well, I'll keep it as simple as I can. It hurts to lose, and it hurts more when it's the last game of the year, and it hurts the most when you're surrounded by a group of guys that is a really, really special group of individuals. So there's not a lot more to say than that. If you want to ask about the game, I'll answer some of those questions, but honestly, for me, that's so far down the list of things, but I understand that's what we're here for.

MODERATOR: Questions for student-athletes.

**Q. If you could each take this. When you think back about this season in five years, ten years, whatever, what do you think people are going to remember about South Carolina men's basketball this year and what you did for the program?**

TA'LON COOPER: I feel like they're going to think this was a winning group, change the program around from the year before. Just a great group of guys that just love to play with each other.

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Like Ta'Lon said, just a great group of guys, special group. Went into a lot of places, a lot of arenas, a lot of people throughout and did some good things this year. Obviously came up short, but just can't take away what we did, the group of guys that was on this team, the fun we had.



**Q. Ta'Lon, one of the videos that South Carolina has played throughout this entire season has been from you from that moment early in the season where you said it's a new era in South Carolina basketball. How do you feel knowing you played a massive part of that in your last year of college basketball?**

TA'LON COOPER: It's Ta'Lon, by the way. But I'm extremely honored and blessed to be able to come here and play for my home state and I give all credit to Coach Paris for that. But just blessed and thankful for the opportunity that I had.

**Q. For either of you guys, what was kind of the basics of the game plan against Jermaine today? What were you all trying to get him to do and what was he able to do to kind of combat you all?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah, he's a good player, made some tough shots, especially over good defense, contested defense. Like I said, he made some good shots. He's a good player. You try to contain him as much as we could. He's a strong driver, but he shot the ball well today. Like I said, he's a good player.

**Q. Ta'Lon, that half-court buzzer beater shot that you had, what was going through your mind when you let that one go and did you feel like it was money when you shot it right before half?**

TA'LON COOPER: No. I didn't have no thought. Just kind of let it go, see where it did, and it just went in, and I just kept running.

**Q. What do you think was the biggest difference in that second half that allowed Oregon to make that large advantage in the second half?**

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah, they were just hitting tough shots, getting the ball down the side. Making some offensive rebounds. They shot a lot of free throws, as well. They hit some tough shots all night, honestly. Played pretty well as a team, and that's that.

**Q. Meechie, this was the season that you talked about**



where you were wanting to find the right pieces, and knowing the journey that you guys have been on over the last two years, what has it meant to see those pieces kind of fall into place in the regular season and be able to kind of see what you guys can actually look like after your first season with Lamont?

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah. I mean, it just goes to the coaching staff, and what they were able to do bringing in the seniors, and obviously Collin stepping up big later on. Like I said, it really just starts with them. They believed in us since the jump. Like I always say, I remember coach trying to tell me, you know, I came back on my B.J. Mac visit, we got a chance to go to the Final Four. Obviously today was the last day, but they always believed in us when nobody else did and that's why we was able to even get to this point so it really starts with them and their belief in us.

MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Paris.

**Q. If you don't mind just kind of touching on the basics of what you all were trying to do against Jermaine today and slowing him down and was it just making tough shots for him?**

LAMONT PARIS: I mean, there was a lot. I mean, I wish we had -- I wish we had found a way to slow him down better. But he went 5 for 9 from three, once in transition as he's dribbling up right in front of us, and 7 for 7 from the free throw line. And he was aggressive, going to the basket. And I think a few of those, I mean he hit a floater against the zone that we fouled him on. He makes tough shots. He doesn't average 40, but he makes tough shots. And I think it was set off by the fact that he went five for nine from the three-point line. I thought that was -- that really ends up making that scoring effort into that scoring effort if you go -- it's hard to get there on twos, but when you go 7 for 7 from the free throw line and 5 for 9 from the three-point line, then something like that comes into it.

We looked at a couple things. We went zone for a couple of possessions just to try to slow down the ball screen a little bit. And then they got an And 1 off of a floater on that. And then out of our double team, they reversed it out of our double team, split the double team and kicked one more for a three. So then I just -- our energy wasn't quite as good in that so we ended up staying man to man, but he was aggressive and he had a good game. He had a good game.

We're normally really good defensively. He had a good game.

**Q. Coach, I know you've touched on it all year but last**

**year it was obviously a tough year, year one. This year you were competing for an SEC title and you just played an NCAA Tournament game. Just encapsulate all that and speak about how special it is to have this team and do that this year?**

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah, I think one day here in the next couple days to a week or whatever, all that stuff will start to set in on what we actually did. When you're in the midst of it, it's hard to do that. Someone's going to tell you, hey, you did this, you had a winning season, you're locked into a winning season or you're locked into a winning SEC season or you got double figure SEC wins first time in however long. They keep coming. They keep coming and you're just so locked into trying to do what you need to do to try to give the guys this opportunity right here, which was our ultimate goal.

And so it'll set in here in a couple of days probably what we -- what they really did. I didn't do a whole bunch, but they did a lot of things this year. So, yeah, that'll set in here over the next couple of days, but it's hard to think about that as much right now when you're really just worried more about your guys and how they're feeling.

**Q. You've obviously been a part of a lot of teams, couple Final Four teams. What made this particular group so unique to coach over the course of the season?**

LAMONT PARIS: I mean, I think it all stemmed from -- it started with who they are as individuals. There's such a high-quality group of human beings. It would be hard for me to overstate that. That's relative -- I've done this a long time. I think it started there. And then I think when you -- then it's how they interact with each other, because you could have great guys, high-quality guys that it just, you know, it just doesn't translate when it comes to how they mesh together. And it did. It did, in an incredible way.

And so that really was -- that really is what made this group able to do what they did on the basketball court, you know. If you look, certainly our guys were better than what people predicted they would be, but they also probably weren't just the best individual talents at every position that we had. But they were winners. They are winners that came together. They're incredible, fierce -- incredibly fierce competitors, and they came together with one goal, and they did that in a way that each of their individual abilities shined.

And so having been around some other teams that have done this, it's not -- I mean, in my experiences, it's not the basketball component of it that allows you to do this. It ends up these other things that ultimately manifest

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

themselves in a basketball game. But it has very little to do with how fast our guys run or how high they jump or the passing or shooting. It has very little to do with that and certainly isn't because I have some magic play. But it always starts from within, and this group had all those characteristics and then some.

**Q. Lamont, you've spoken so much about this team getting this kind of success. Now, as the page turns, how much of a challenge will it be to replicate the success and keep this kind of thing going?**

LAMONT PARIS: Well, I mean, to replicate the most wins in school history, that'll be difficult. We could be significantly better next year and have a worse record. That's the reality of it. So that's why you're always trying to identify the means by which you will gauge success, and it's not just what the record is. Certainly, ultimately, we'd like to be playing back in this tournament again and put ourselves in position to do that. I think that's the real challenge. I mean it's a real challenge. If you look, I think -- I don't think I'm making anything up, but I think we had nine NCAA Tournament appearances in school history before this. So doing it with a level of consistency has been a challenge, and that will be a challenge for us, too.

But I'll tell you, from a foundation standpoint on paper, this is 2024. So, you know, we'll see what happens at the end of the season. But on paper, I mean, I like -- really like what our foundation looks like, and I think more importantly than what those individuals are as basketball players, the culture that we have developed, the way in which we work, the way in which we interact, the way in which we respond to coaching, all that stuff. That stuff could not be in a better place, and so I'm extremely optimistic. That's why I decided to come back. I love it at South Carolina. I love our guys. I love the people I'm around, I love the other coaches. I love who I work with, and there was a lot of speculation about a lot of other things that were out there. And so it's no accident that I ended up right back where I am, and hopefully it displays the level of belief that I have in not only what we're doing as a staff, but just in who we're around every day and what I believe that looks like moving forward.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

LAMONT PARIS: Thanks.

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