

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - New Mexico vs Clemson

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FedExForum

Clemson Tigers

Coach Brad Brownell

Joseph Girard III

Chase Hunter

PJ Hall

Media Conference

Q. You guys were here a couple months ago. Did that go through your mind at all when the announcement was made where you were going? And how do you feel about coming back and playing in a building that you're sort of familiar with and sort of had a little bit of bad luck there on the floor?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: Especially in March, you want to look at all the little things to give you a little bit of an advantage. You can kind of look at that to our advantage.

But in the end you've got to go back out there and play the game. And it definitely is a little bit good to have some familiarity with where we're going, with the arena, with the hoops, all that stuff. Definitely gives us a little bit of an advantage. But at the end of the day we've still got to go out and play.

Q. With the transfer portal, with everything that goes on in college basketball, we see fewer guys spending four years in college, four years at one school. What do you think of that trend? And how have you personally kind of chosen your paths for how you've done things?

CHASE HUNTER: I think it all depends on the player. It all depends on the school and what they go through in their career. I'm a person that's been at Clemson for four years now, well, five years, and it's been a long journey.

I just had my own path, and I think just depends on the player, depends on the school. You could go through



things with coaches leaving, players leaving.

And, like I said, just depends on the player and what they go through. Now with the portal, you have an opportunity to go to another school and maximize your college career. Like I said, it just depends on a player and what they want to do in their career.

PJ HALL: Same what he was saying, it all depends on the player and their situation. Obviously Joe was at Syracuse for four years and had a fifth year, so it's a little different situation for getting into the portal.

But there's also situations, like where, to an extent there's too many guys jumping in as well. That's the kind of thing going on now. I think that's what's given strength to a lot of these mid-majors, like the JMUs and stuff and great teams and programs because you have these guys that are more experienced and stay there for four years, have a core group.

If can you build that core group now and keep them for a while it keeps you really tight on the court.

We have some guys here that have been here for a while -- me and Chase, Ian Schieffelin has been here for three years. Alex Hemenway, who is not playing right now but he's still a guy who is involved a lot.

That's what's special about Clemson. We tend to be a school that keeps guys set in stone for a while. And we're very welcoming for new guys. It's been great for us this year and it's nice to have that. And it's also a great thing to have guys for four years.

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I think these guys both hit it on the head. It's different for everybody. For me personally, my path was a little bit different. I graduated from Syracuse. My coach decided to retire. Obviously playing for Coach Boeheim, there's nothing like it.

Once that happened, COVID was kind of like a blessing in disguise. You get another year, another opportunity. And I said, why not? Let's explore something else. And obviously Clemson was the best choice for me.



But there's obviously pros and cons to everything. I think it's good for guys who feel like they made a decision that wasn't the best for themselves right out of high school. It doesn't work out for them for whatever reason. It kind of gives them a second chance to go somewhere else and kind of revive their career and make something out of it.

There's always positives in everything, and just depends how you look at it.

Q. How aware are you of the projections or the picks of everybody saying New Mexico is one of the most likely to have an upset? Do you take that in? Do you block it out? How much do you think about it?

PJ HALL: It's pretty hard not to see that kind of stuff, just with the social media and stuff. But at the same time, also after our last loss, can't blame all the people for thinking that.

But at the same time we've had some great press leading into this, and we know what kind of team we are. We're excited to get out there and play. And whatever it may be, 16-1, 11-6, 12-5, anybody can win on the court. We're focused on our guys and we're excited to get out there.

Q. In terms of their tempo, do they remind you of anybody you played during the season? Or how unique are they in terms of how fast they get up and down the floor?

CHASE HUNTER: Yeah, I mean, I think they play sort of like Alabama -- quick guards; big, physical bigs that can do some things. I think they play similar to Alabama, they're a team that can get up and down. And got some quick guards that can make plays for themselves. I think we prepared well for them.

Q. All three of you from your different perspectives, Chase and PJ, you've been at a school your entire career that's very football crazy. Joe, you came from a school that maybe lives and dies more with basketball. How do you see Clemson and the success Coach Brownell has had and the success you guys have had this year and also in recent years?

PJ HALL: It's been a fun year just because we've had some success. Along with other sports, it's been a fun year for sports in general.

Coming off a 10-1 season with football last year, I was really excited for them going into this year. That's our main sport at Clemson. There's no denying it. Having basketball, having a great year this year has been fun for

us because people like to say, oh, basketball's got a back seat or other sports have a back seat. But at a school like Clemson where it's a small community, everybody's tight knit, everybody's in love with Clemson sports in general.

We have crazy support for our soccer teams who are national champions, softball which got added a few years ago. Our gymnastic team that got added this year has been sold out every meet. It's electric.

So Clemson athletics has incredible support across the board. It definitely doesn't feel that we have a back seat. It's fun to play at Clemson for sure.

Q. Was there anything about when you were here the last time that you used going forward over the rest of the season to, like, maybe inform how you approached certain things? Or was there something that you -- I don't know -- a lesson you learned or anything from here that you employed the rest of the way?

CHASE HUNTER: I mean, I would say for me that was the COVID year we went. So it was definitely a different experience. We were at one hotel with all the other teams.

PJ HALL: Are you talking about playing here or --

CHASE HUNTER: I thought you meant the tournament. Playing here.

Like Joe said, like we said about playing here, you play on the same rims, play on the same court. But at the end of the day we've just gotta go out and play our best game.

I think playing here definitely was an advantage that we played here earlier in the season. Didn't turn out the way we wanted it to. But we got another chance, another opportunity to prove ourselves.

PJ HALL: I'd say in terms of how the game went, one thing I thought about after that was, as it gets down to the wire with a team that does a little bit of run and jump like Memphis was, who is kind of similar to a New Mexico, probably not as fast. But play your game, stay poised, and run your stuff, that's a big thing we were playing fast teams.

Yes, they (indiscernible) sped up. That's what we learned from the Memphis game and tried to employ for the rest of the year.

Q. What does it feel like, especially PJ and Chase, to bring Clemson back to this stage? You guys haven't been here in a couple of years.

PJ HALL: I'd say, first of all, we didn't do it alone. We had

incredible coaches and a lot of guys that came and helped us along the way. Obviously we brought in new guys like Joe and Jack who are tremendous boosts for us, shooting on the outside. Then 1 through 5, switching with Jack, who can play incredible defensive and rebound.

It wasn't just us bringing us back. It's been fun. It's been expected. Last year we definitely felt shorted after having a great year, 14 wins in the ACC and getting left out of the tournament.

So this year it's not necessarily like, oh, we've got to get to the tournament, we've got to get to the tournament. That's our floor, that's how we expected it.

So the whole year we were expecting to come here and play our game and make some noise. That's kind of how we thought about it the entire year with the players we have and the coaches we have.

Q. As you noted, you kind of struggled down the stretch. If each of you could take an aspect of the team going into tomorrow that you think you kind of kind of flipped that switch to get back to where you were playing your best, what would it be in each of your opinions?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I think, first off, I think that our practices this last week have been a lot better. There's a lot more on edge. I think just kind of, one of the things that the coaches were, I guess, emphasizing was getting our edge back. And we had that obviously the first two months of the season. And it's easy to have an edge when you're 10-0 whatever it was, 11-1 at one point.

It's easy to be up when things are going great. But when things were going bad, you just gotta figure out a way to get out of the hole and try to get that edge back. I think that's what we've done this last week.

And, again, trying to look at everything positive. Losing early in the ACC Tournament kind of gives you a chance to go back to practice and get your mind right. So I think if we took a look at it that way it will help us for tomorrow.

PJ HALL: Yeah, especially what Joe said, the last point, losing early in the ACC Tournament in the fashion we did was not just disappointing, but embarrassing. So going back to these practices, going good on good and making sure we're sharpening our edges and making sure we're having a competitive edge and fight was huge for us.

And going into these last few practices, after we had some time off or not time off but the first couple after the ACC Tournament, sharpen our minds, ready for the tournament

and sharpen our minds for the opponent, that's big for us.

It's not necessarily flip a switch. If you have to flip a switch then you have a problem especially this late in the year. It's time to be ready to be on go at all times.

CHASE HUNTER: For me, I think game-wise, we just gotta be able to fight through adversity. We've had some games where we started off great and the teams come out and make a run. As the three leaders here, we've got to be able to step up, whether it's calling timeout, bringing the team together and making sure we get a stop or a big basket when we need it. I think going into this tournament, we made sure we put more focus on that, and making sure as leaders of this team we get the team together and we do what we need to do.

Q. PJ, you were mentioning the coaching staff. Coach Brownell, how much respect do you feel he gets from the fan base compared to what he deserves, and is there any motivation to try to make a run to kind of back him up?

PJ HALL: Yeah, there's always been motivation for me to -- not just me, the whole team -- to fight and win for him and the loss at Cameron this year was sickening because I know he had never won there. He's had so much close chances. It feels every time it's like what's going on? It hurts.

So wanting to win for him, wanting to win for the rest of our coaching staff is huge because I don't want to say there's not a respect for him, but there is -- you hear all the outside voices of people who aren't fans of him. And it's frustrating because of how much we care and love that guy and how incredible he is and how smart of a coach he is.

So it definitely is an added motivation to fight for our coaches. There's not a whole lot of motivation you need to get up for these games.

If you have added stuff, it's special, yeah.

Q. What has been Coach Brownell's message heading into tomorrow's game throughout these last few days of practice?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I think it was getting the edge back. Coach Brownell is someone who loves to go to work, loves to work hard. He said that to us, ultimately we had a lot of days in between our last game and tomorrow, and likely we probably wanted a few more days off. But Coach Brownell is a guy who likes to get back to work. I think it's good for us. It's been good for us. It's kind of given us that competitive spirit that will help us for tomorrow, and I think

just the biggest thing is getting the edge back, like I said.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined at the podium by Brad Brownell.

BRAD BROWNELL: Just excited to be here. Really happy for our players, especially after being left out last year. Just really wanted these guys to be able to experience this opportunity.

We were last in the tournament, I think it was in '21, which was the COVID year. So guys like Chase and PJ, for us, Alex Hemenway, those guys didn't really get a true NCAA Tournament.

So we're just excited to be here. Have a lot of respect for Richard. Coached against him while he was at Minnesota. He's done a terrific job there at New Mexico. Super talented team that is probably playing their best basketball when it matters most right now, having won the Mountain West Tournament. And we know we have our hands full with that group.

But we're looking forward to the challenge. And we didn't play our best in our last outing. And I think our guys are looking forward to doing a little bit better this time.

Q. Obviously you added a couple of important pieces, but the core of this team are guys who have been together for a long time. How has that changed the way you coached them? And how has that made them better because of maybe that chemistry or whatever you've seen?

BRAD BROWNELL: I think coaching right now is really challenging. As much as I love building a program and having guys on my team for four and five years, guys like PJ and Chase, I know that's becoming much more rare and challenging.

So it changes things a little bit. You certainly have to be open to the portal. I think the most important thing is you find kids that fit what you're about, fit your program. You bring in guys that have opportunities to play so that there's an understanding there. And I think it's really important that the guys who are still in your program are open to that.

I pride myself on being extremely honest with our players. Sometimes they don't like all the things I have to say to them, but I do think they think I have their best interests at heart, and I'm always honest in terms of what we're trying to get done. And so we talk about bringing guys in and what we're looking to do and what that means moving forward.

And certainly the guys that we brought in this year, we knew they were impact guys. And we thought we had a chance to have a really good team. And Joe and Jack Clark and Bas and those guys have done a really nice job of helping our team.

They did exactly kind of what we recruited them to do. And I give a lot of credit to the guys in our program because they've welcomed those guys, and we've had a great locker room.

Somebody just asked me in the back there, what was the strength of our team, and I think it's our togetherness. I think we have guys that really care about one another. And I'm really proud of that and proud of our team because of that.

Q. New Mexico, asking the players, they were saying the tempo, reminds them a little bit of Alabama. Would you say that's accurate? What do you have to do well to combat that?

BRAD BROWNELL: Obviously transition -- defense, rebounding are important, much like when you play North Carolina. They're an outstanding rebounding team as well.

But they have great speed. Their guard play is outstanding, and that's not to take anything away from the two post players. The more I've watched them, the more impressed I've been.

But we've got to run good offense. We have to take care of the ball. They're aggressive defensively in certain ways, and they'll even gamble a little bit and go for steals and they try to block a lot of shots. They get their hands on balls. They're very active. They're playing really hard.

Us executing, us running good stuff, us being opportunistic. It's not like we don't want to run; when we have opportunities, we do. But just being smart about how we play and making sure that we're balanced on defense and that we rebound the ball very well.

Q. How did that hit you when the news on Selection Sunday that you'd be coming back here?

BRAD BROWNELL: It was funny, because we're all kind of standing there as coaches, and are we going to be in the 7-10 game here, are we going to be in the 6-11 game there. We figured those were the two most likely scenarios.

The longer it went obviously you get a little more anxious. But then it was like, hey, we see that Memphis is open. We've been there. We've played in the arena. Pretty cool.

Although the game didn't end the way we wanted it to, it was a heck of a game. Our guys played pretty well in spurts and shot the ball well. We had a great first experience here minus the ending, maybe the last two minutes.

So we were excited. Also, we know a lot of our fans are going to be able to come. It's close enough that they can come. And with it being on Friday makes it even easier for folks to get off work. So happy to be in Memphis.

Q. If you were going to go back to a place that you had played earlier in the season would you rather have been somewhere where you had won?

BRAD BROWNELL: I don't think we really worried about those kinds of things. Just somewhere where they're going to take good care of us, and they have so far.

Q. One more on the veterans and the guys that have been here with you. Is it easier to make in-game adjustments when you have guys you know well, they know you?

BRAD BROWNELL: That's a good point. And yes, it is. It's much easier with an older group and with some experienced players that you've kind of been around a couple of years to know -- because I am a coach that adjusts a lot game to game.

We change our scouting. We change our ball screen coverages. We run different packages offensively in different games. We probably do more different things than a lot of teams in our league.

And it does help to have a veteran group and it helps to have guys you've been with a couple of years to kind of understand that and pass it along.

I do think we have a tremendous culture. We have former players that we've heard a lot from recently supporting us and it's just passed on down -- Eli Thomas to Aamir Simms to PJ Hall to Ian Schieffelin. And it's been that way for a number of years and it's something we're proud of.

Q. Three players all said they hated losing in the ACC Tournament early, but it gave you extra practice time. And I think they all said practice went well. What did you see in practice? And Joseph said they even got the edge back that you had earlier.

BRAD BROWNELL: I hope so. I don't know if we have played as poorly as it's been made out by some of the media. I realize we've lost three out of four. And we did

play very poorly against Boston College. Some of that -- I don't want to take anything away from Boston College; Boston College is playing great basketball right now, and just had a really good win against Providence on the road. But we didn't play well in that game.

The loss to Wake Forest, we played pretty well. Wake lost one game at home all year, and we had a chance to win late and just couldn't get it done. But we played well.

We had some good wins in the last two weeks, at home against Pittsburgh and Syracuse, two 20-win teams.

So I don't think we're playing as poorly as some folks think, but we did play poorly in the ACC Tournament.

Got home and had to face it. I was very direct with our players that it was a missed opportunity. And I was really disappointed in it.

And I think sometimes you can, at this time of year there are more distractions than ever. And I just challenged our guys to try to get back to the mindset that we had in November and December.

And a lot of that, it's funny, but I asked our guys, in November, what were you thinking about in regards to basketball. And they said, yeah, we're tired of practice; we just want to play. And it really doesn't matter who we play.

And then as you're winning in November and December, there's a joy and an excitement and an enthusiasm that you ride that wave.

But then the season hits and you're going to have some ups and downs. And we certainly have been through a few of those. You've got to kind of reset.

We just talked about resetting, recentering ourselves, eliminating as many distractions and as much of the noise as we can and get back to work. So we practiced twice on Saturday and once on Sunday, did a very light workout on Monday and have worked out obviously Tuesday and Wednesday to get ready.

I think we're ready. I hope we're recentered. But this is about players making plays and we're going to find out where our guys are here come game time.

Q. In a conference and a school that's kind of football-driven in the conversation a lot of the times, how important can the success in March, specifically, be when you're in the national spotlight, everybody is watching, to prove to or showcase to collectives, administration, boosters what the value of contributing



to your program is?

BRAD BROWNELL: I don't think it's just the end of the year. Certainly that's a part of it and making the NCAA Tournament is unbelievably hard. And so just getting to here is step one. Certainly building off of this, it's an unbelievable opportunity. And we love to take the next step. That's what we're trying to do as a program.

We've been to three of the last seven. So we've made some steps here. We went to a Sweet 16 in '18. So we know what it looks like. I think we've been consistently, I think we're fifth in the ACC in wins over the last five years.

So I think we've done a lot of really good things that show people that we're a good basketball program. We're doing things the right way.

But, again, to take another step, we've got to bust through consistently this time of year. In this tournament, it gives you the opportunity to do that. Nobody wants to more than me or our players. And so, again, we're excited about the opportunity that we have against New Mexico to do that.

Q. You were talking about distractions earlier. There's been stuff in the news the last couple days with regard to the ACC and the conference and all that stuff. Is that a distraction?

BRAD BROWNELL: No, to be honest with you, I'm not involved in any of that. There's a lot of folks on our campus much smarter than me that are leading our university.

Graham Neff, our athletic director; Jim Clements, our president; our board -- we have great leadership at our school. They're handling that. My head's been down; they've not called me one time to ask me my opinion. Thankfully I'm focused on New Mexico.

Q. Do you have an opinion?

BRAD BROWNELL: No, it's too important for me to be involved in anything like that.

Q. On the topic of distractions, how have you found the transfer portal opening right before the NCAA Tournament starts? What's that been like for you and your staff?

BRAD BROWNELL: Distracting. And I'm on an NABC committee that -- I was adamantly against this for this very reason. It's a hard time of year for everybody, players, coaches, the whole nine yards.

There's a lot of coaches, especially at mid-major schools, whose tournaments end earlier and they were very vocal about, the longer we have to wait, the harder it is for us to have to figure out what to do.

I understand why there's a segment of our coaching fraternity that wants that, but I also think this is really -- I don't think this is the right time. And for folks to be talking about it, and the media is talking about it to some degree, and as coaches have to have one eye on it -- I wished we could wait a couple more weeks, maybe not all the way through the Final Four certainly, but at least one more week to next week when now there's only 16 teams playing, and even, if possible, to get to the following week of the Final Four would even be best. But we're all kind of living and learning through this process right now.

Q. When you list some of the accolades, three tournaments the last seven years, Sweet 16, do you feel the fan base appreciates that, are they able to see the bigger picture and how do you deal with people who don't quite think you do enough?

BRAD BROWNELL: I don't worry about it. I hope they do. More importantly, it's about my administration and the folks that I work for, and my players understanding that we're doing the best we can to put them in position to be successful and showing folks that this is a winning program and there has been a pretty high level of consistency.

We're trying to raise the ceiling, certainly. I know we've raised the floor considerably since I got here. But I don't get too distracted with all of that. I've got enough to worry about, day to day just coaching my team and planning for the future.

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