

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Memphis, Tennessee, USA

FedExForum

Clemson Tigers

Coach Brad Brownell

Chase Hunter

PJ Hall

Media Conference

Clemson - 77, New Mexico - 56

BRAD BROWNELL: Really proud of our players. I just thought we played at a very high level, super competitive spirit, togetherness, toughness. New Mexico comes in playing extremely well. Richard's done an unbelievable job with their team.

And we were ready. And I'm just happy that our guys were able to get past our last performance. Certainly we're excited to be here, be a part of this great tournament. And looking forward to another big match-up on Sunday, I guess.

Q. Chase, when PJ and Schief went to the bench with three fouls, looked like you elevated your game even another level knowing you had to take over there. What was your mindset coming into that stretch of the game knowing that New Mexico had the momentum?

CHASE HUNTER: I would say we had the momentum the whole game. It was just about us staying calm, staying poised. And for me I just wanted to make plays for my teammates. Obviously I made some plays for myself.

Like I said, I wanted to make plays for my teammates. We made some big plays down the stretch. We kept the lead big and we didn't let them come back. That was big for us this game.

Q. You guys played here already, obviously, this year. I know your coach mentioned the other day he did think that would be an advantage for you guys. Three months removed, the sight lines, the depth perception,



do you think that was an advantage for you?

PJ HALL: I think going into the game a little bit, keeps it fresh in your mind. But I said to the press the first day, once you're in the lines and the ball is tipped, you could be playing with no fans, just you're out there playing ball.

There's advantages all over the place, but once you're playing, going hard and stuff, there's not a whole lot of difference.

Q. You mentioned, I think, on Selection Sunday, it's one thing to get in the tournament but it's another thing to be able to do something with that. Just what's the feeling to notch off this first victory?

PJ HALL: I think that especially after the ACC Tournament, it's kind of a monkey off our back. We went into this with a great mindset with a couple of great practices, a lot of good on good, iron sharpening iron.

Going into this tournament we knew that wasn't a goal of ours to get to the tournament. That was an expectation. Especially the talent, the experience and the veterans on this team that we have, we were very excited to obviously get here. But now it's time to continue to work.

Q. UNM is a team that's feasted off points off turnovers all season long. Last week in the Mountain West Tournament they averaged 18 points off turnovers. You guys got them 19-6 today in points off turnovers. How were you able to not turn the ball over against a team that forces a lot of them, but also turn so many of your turnovers into points?

CHASE HUNTER: That was the emphasis going into the game. We wanted to make sure we took care of the ball. We knew that was something they did well. We had a few times where the guard got up into us a bit. But we stayed calm and poised.

And Coach put an emphasis on us on defense, we needed to force turnovers ourselves. Luckily we did that this game, and we capitalized off those. And it worked in our favor today.



Q. Three 11 seeds won yesterday, did that get your attention, like, no, we're not going to let that happen to us?

PJ HALL: Yeah, we watched a lot of basketball yesterday. It's nice to be off our feet and stuff. But those other games don't affect your own. You have to make sure you're focused on your own guys, your own agenda, your own game plan, and go into it with fresh minds, not worrying about other teams.

I think our guys, especially off the bench, did a great job coming in and continuing to give us a spark and making sure we executed our game plan.

Q. Along those same lines, you guys were an underdog, according to the betting lines coming into this one. Did you guys know that? Did it give you a little extra motivation heading into it?

CHASE HUNTER: We weren't focused on any betting lines or anything like that. We were focused on winning our game, playing our game.

We heard a lot of talk about that New Mexico was going to beat us, but we were just focused on us. We came out with some fire and intensity. They couldn't handle it in the beginning. We kept it on them. We just kept our poise and our confidence. And we finished this game.

PJ HALL: Yeah, I mean, that's not a whole lot of our focus right now. Whenever we hear that outside noise -- obviously we want to prove people wrong, but once you start focusing on the outside stuff that's when you get astray from your game plan. You have to focus on your own agenda and your own style of play and just have some poise.

Q. This is your longest period of rest so far in the season. How fresh did you feel coming into this game?

PJ HALL: I felt super fresh. A lot of the guys did. At the same time, we're all 23 and under. We might be old for college guys, but we're still pretty young. We have fresh legs.

You have to think about it, one thing I like to think about when you're going through the preseason you're going through two-and-a-half, three-hour practices every day, a lot of good on good, going up and down. If you're doing that back-to-back days, this is nothing.

Having fresh legs and being motivated is not the problem

this time of year. Got a little rest in foul trouble too. (Laughter).

Q. About being in foul trouble, how hard was that to be kind of on the bench for as much as you were? And what was it like to watch RJ produce the way he did when you were out?

PJ HALL: It obviously was frustrating. You want to be out there to help your team and stuff. But knowing we've got a guy, RJ, that can go in there and have an immediate spark. There was a ball -- myself included, kind of struggled to get a couple rebounds, had some yips when it was coming to me -- but a ball in the first half, I swear to you, was floating, like elbow above the rim going up to get it.

Having a guy like that to go in there and give you a spark is huge when guys get into foul trouble. And Schief ended up getting into some.

Q. Chase, Coach said at the beginning of the last game left a bad taste in everybody's mouth. It wasn't the best game for you. Was that kind of your mindset, too, coming into this game and this tournament, that that's not me, I have to play better for my teammates?

CHASE HUNTER: Definitely. I was down about that game. I felt like I let my team down. I let the whole university down, to be honest.

But coming into this tournament, I was fired up. I wanted to make sure I impacted this game whether it was on defense, offense, making plays for my teammates. And that was my whole focus coming to this tournament. I want to keep doing that.

Q. Chase, House and Mashburn combine for 49 points in the Mountain West Tournament championship game. And tonight both combined for 18 points. What was the game plan against those two to limit them and contain them today?

CHASE HUNTER: It was just really keeping them out of the paint. They're really not good shooting guards. They're guys that like to drive the ball. For us it was closing out short, making sure if it's hedging the ball screens making sure they don't get into the paint, making them find other guys for shots. We did. We executed well. We were able to stop them.

Q. As we were going down the stretch of the regular season and the ACC coaches were asked repeatedly about how many teams you guys deserve to get in, one of the things you pointed to was the success of the league in the tournament. In doing so, you may

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have put a little target on your back also. How important is it to back that talk up? And how good do you feel about accomplishing that today?

BRAD BROWNELL: It is important. I'm very proud of our league. We've consistently been very successful in the tournament. It's frustrating sometimes.

Obviously last year, for us, was excruciating. I mean, I can't even begin to tell you how hard that is when you have guys that you really care about and love, and they've been dreaming of playing in the tournament and you miss it by a game. And you think you deserve to be in there because you can win.

So it's really hard. And certainly this team, I think we felt like if we get into the tournament, we can advance. We feel good about ourselves. We know we played very poorly in our last game. But I think oftentimes people look too much into one or two games.

These are young people that are going to have tough days, and sometimes you don't give enough credit to our opponent. I thought Boston College played great in the game against us.

We weren't playing as poorly, I said it yesterday, we weren't playing as poorly as everybody thinks we are. Obviously some of that showed today.

Q. RJ Godfrey's progression throughout the season, especially when you have Ian and PJ in foul trouble, what did his performance mean for today as a capsule to the year?

BRAD BROWNELL: Bench performance is important. I don't love PJ play 18 minutes. It needs to be 28. I thought Wiggins and Dillon, Chase's little brother and RJ were fantastic. That was a big factor in the game.

To be honest they didn't play well at Boston College game. We didn't have anybody play well. It takes six, seven, eight guys really competing at a high level and playing together. We had that tonight.

But I'm super happy for RJ. He's an unbelievable young man. Tremendous, positive energy-giver. And he works really hard at it. His athleticism is certainly a factor and he was a major factor today.

Q. Defensively today you held them to 29 percent shooting, 3-of-23 from 3, won the turnover battle. On that end what were you most pleased with?

BRAD BROWNELL: All of the above. We really tried to

eliminate their rim shots. When we studied them, we just felt liable they get to the rim maybe as well as almost any team we played all year, whether it's transition, whether it's offensive rebound put-backs, whether it's low-post duck-ins, escort layups off ball-screen action. That was the major focus was no rim shots for them.

And I thought our defense was set up accordingly. And then I thought because we executed very well on offense we were able to play the game the way we wanted to play it. Getting off to a good start was extremely helpful as well.

Q. You mentioned the offensive execution. Was there anything you did specifically on offense to combat their tempo?

BRAD BROWNELL: Not really. It was a strange game -- not strange in a lot of ways, but you get up early, and those are sometimes hard games to play because you're trying to still be aggressive and go make plays, but at the same time you're trying not to shoot too quick because we want our big guys to be involved and the game can get going like this.

It was just kind of reminding our guys, shot selection, tempo, play the game the way we need to play, share the ball, make good decisions. They're constantly trying to speed you up with traps and reading ball screens and coming back getting your outlet guys.

It probably felt like they were doing more damage than when I look at the stat sheet and we only had nine turnovers and I think five of them were our big guys. So it kind of felt like our guards at time were under duress, and they were. But they were probably handling it better than we all realized.

Q. The points off turnover kind of flipping that script is something that they've been feasting on when they've been successful all year. Is it as simple as just saying, hey, protect the ball --

BRAD BROWNELL: Basketball sureness is a tournament term we use. And it's just shot faking, pass faking, stepping around pivoting, playing off two feet, fundamental discipline that you have to show under duress. And that's not the fun stuff the guys like to practice. But in games like this, it's critical.

I thought our guys did a pretty good job of that this game. So it's all the stuff you do, two-minute drills we call them, and things we do in pre-practice to fundamentally get our guys as sound as we can.

Q. What did it mean to you to get those walk-ons in in

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that final minute?

BRAD BROWNELL: That was great. Those guys do an unbelievable job for us and work so hard. And you're just happy to reward them. They're great kids that give everything they have every day. They do everything our scholarship guys do. They lift. They run. They practice hard. They come in extra. So for those guys to get that memory is terrific.

Q. Chase Hunter, 0-for- 10 in the ACC Tournament game. How mentally strong do you have to be to come back from a game like that and play this way? We talk about the ups and downs of Chase's career.

BRAD BROWNELL: He wanted to play very well, and he was heartbroken, disappointed. Obviously he just told you, he felt like he let a lot of people down.

That's why I'm so proud of our guys. We have great kids. They're -- not just for their performance but they let their team down, they let the university down, he said. How many kids say that? Right? How many kids are thinking about other people like that?

High character kid. I'm happy for him. And not surprised at all that he bounced back and played the way he did.

Q. I asked you yesterday about in-game adjustments with older players. How about with a day in between the game, can you put more in the scout, can you do more, or is that risky business?

BRAD BROWNELL: No, we just approach it -- I probably make our guys learn more than most, I challenge them that way. Just smart, tough, together teams win. It's funny, I wrote it on my marker board at halftime again to remind our guys. Smart, tough, together teams win.

And the smart part is important. You can't just play hard. You can play as hard as you want, but if you're not doing the right things, you're not going to win.

The teams that are still in this tournament, top 32 teams in the country, know how to play. They have good players. They have great coaches. You've got to execute. And certainly I'm proud of my guys for the way they did that today. And we know we'll have to do the same thing.

Scott Drew is an incredible coach, won the national championship and has a very talented team. So we'll have to be on the top of our game to win.

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