

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Norfolk State vs Florida

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Lenovo Center

Norfolk State Spartans

Robert Jones

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are now ready to start Coach Jones' press conference.

Coach, could we start with an opening statement, please.

ROBERT JONES: Once again, happy to be back here. It's been three years. I felt like something's been missing in my life and now I got it back. I'm very excited to be here. I'm excited about the opportunity we have to play against one of the best teams in the country.

I'm excited about the year that we had and just ready to get going tomorrow. Just a level of excitement that's surrounding Norfolk State men's basketball program right now.

Q. You mentioned it's good to be back for the first time in three years, but your program over the dozen seasons and even when you were assistant just keeps winning and winning, especially at the MEAC level. What has been the key to sustaining that success?

ROBERT JONES: The kids sustain that success. It's funny you say winning at the MEAC level, we've probably win more games not conference than in conference over those times. Just having the right players, the right culture. Just building the right culture, sometimes that's hard to do in this day and age when there's not a lot of carryover.

It's just the coaches really sticking together. I think it's one of the most undervalued thing we have, people always look at our returning players, but I've been with my coaches almost 10 years, each one of them. So I think that's something that's very, very undervalued.

The coaches are clearly, clearly happy, been dealing with me for a decade. So it's great to have them and great for them to keep forging the culture forward, the winning



culture that we like to have.

Q. Just kind of curious, when you look at film, what you see in Walter Clayton Jr., how difficult he is to deal with?

ROBERT JONES: He's been difficult for everybody in the country. Like I told our guys, we just want to slow him down. Over the last five games, he's been averaging even more than he's been averaging the whole season. He's been averaging 21 points a game, shooting 42 percent from 3. Those are real numbers, and he has to be slowed down.

I'm not going to use the word stop because a kid like that is going to get enough touches, is going to get enough opportunities to score the ball, that we just have to slow him down. We just can't allow him to have a big, big game.

If he gets 10 points, 12, that's okay. We just can't have him get the 25s and the 30s and things of that nature. So he's probably going to be number one for us, and hopefully we can do a good job collectively of shutting him down. It's not going to be one person. It's going to be a team effort. I think everyone is excited about the challenge.

Q. I asked Christian to talk about the lessons the team learned from last year's CIT tournament title. He talked about how the halftime score isn't the final score and they have to keep that mentality. What lessons are you going to draw from in trying to prepare for this Florida team that has been just dominating the entire year?

ROBERT JONES: It's funny, I'm glad Christian listens because we talked about that. We said that the most insignificant score is halftime score because, whether you're up or whether you're down, clearly the other team did something to you that you have another chance to do the next 20 minutes to get back, whether you're winning or losing. So the most insignificant score is the halftime score.

For us last year in the CIT, we were down 18 at one point, and we just kept chipping and chipping and chipping and came back and won that game by double figures.

Florida is not Indiana, Purdue, Fort Wayne, they're not them, they're a lot better than them. But at the same time, we played a pretty tough schedule. We played five NCAA Tournament teams, and that was done on purpose, to get to a moment like this.

We played Tennessee pretty close. We beat High Point. We played a couple other people, we beat Alabama State, we played other people close that this shouldn't be a Shell shock to us, right? We have to withstand the first blow because I know Florida's playing for a National Championship, but if they tell our guys we're one of the 68 teams here, so we're playing for the National Championship too.

So we have to be able to withstand their first blow, those first two medias to try to make it a game. Any other upset we've had, in 2012 with Missouri and 2019 with Alabama, those were all close games in the first half and it gave us the confidence to push us through to the second half. That's what we're hoping for tomorrow against Florida.

Q. 2012, 2019 -- in 2012, that came on the heels of the football program making the FCS playoffs for the first time and playing Old Dominion, and now Michael Vick in football, you and Coach Vickers have your teams in March Madness. Is the vibe around Norfolk State athletics similar at all to the way it was in 2011-12?

ROBERT JONES: Like you said, there's a lot of excitement. Coach Vickers is doing an amazing job with the women's basketball tournament. We've won 3 of the last 5 MEAC titles to be in March Madness, and now the excitement around Coach Vick.

You potentially have your three revenue sports that should be able to take off, so there is a level of excitement. It's probably even more excitement than it was back in 2011-2012 because that was the first for everything. That was the first football championship. That was the first basketball championship. Now that we've done it a few times, it's the level of what's next? How can we keep upgrading this program to not only be one of the best programs in the MEAC or the HBCU program, but to be one of the best mid-majors in the country.

I think the basketball teams have done that. You've got the women's basketball team, they're like No. 4 in the mid-major poll. We were 25 in the mid-major poll. We're starting to show it's not just about the MEAC or HBCU, that we're really one of the best mid-majors in the country, and we play a good brand of basketball. We're ready to put that on display tomorrow.

Q. Coach, you talked about the 2012 team, and the

thing about the 2012 team, you had a lot of those guys for a lot of years. Obviously things are different now. But what does it mean to have a guy like Christian Ings, who has stuck around for four years. Not a lot of four-year guys left these days. What kind of similarities do you see from this team to that team?

ROBERT JONES: Christian Ings is going to be like a dinosaur, the last remaining four-year guy in Division I. You might as well get a fossil up of him because he's the last guy standing. There's not going to be another four-year Division I guy.

Like we've spoken before, if you're too good, you're going to transfer. If you're not good and you're mad, you're going to transfer. So there's never going to be another four-year guy. With that being said, I think he has tremendous pride in Norfolk State because -- I mean, clearly, I'm not saying what level he would have went to, but he could have transferred last year. He averaged almost 10 points a game. These kids are averaging 4 points a game that's transferring.

Norfolk State has been good to him, and he's been good to Norfolk State, and I'm sure that he wants to cap off his career with a tremendous win tomorrow. So he's focused. I think he's trying to get everyone else to be as focused as him. There's no extra year for him. There's no second chance for him. This is it.

So I think he's going to play with a level of urgency, a level of intentionality, and hopefully we'll go get the job done.

Q. Coach, you mentioned being battle tested, playing High Point and Alabama State, getting those wins. Do you think the team kind of thrives off being that tremendous underdog coming into tomorrow, David versus Goliath type of mentality?

ROBERT JONES: I think that for myself, I coach better when I'm angry, and I'm angry a little bit about the way the point spread is and things like that.

I know Florida's really, really good, and they run a great program, got great players, but are we that bad that the point spread is like that? I'm a little angry, and like I said, I'm a little bit more focused and play better when I'm angry. I think the players play better when they're angry.

A lot of times in the MEAC Conference, we're always the hunted. We're not the hunter, but out of conference, we're the hunter. That's where we're trying to prove ourselves. We're trying to show that it's more than just the MEAC, it's more than the HBCUs, whatever it is. We're trying to show that we're truly one of the best teams in the country.

So I think there's a different level of focus and intensity that we bring. Hence why we've competed well in the nonconference this year against some of the best teams in the country.

I think tomorrow the guys are excited about the challenge. No one in that locker room is scared. No one in that locker room is afraid. We're excited about the challenge of playing the University of Florida.

Q. When you coach angry, how does it manifest itself? How do you get that across to your players, and how do they respond?

ROBERT JONES: They know when I'm angry (laughter). They know, they see it in my eyes. They see it in the way I walk. They see the way I talk.

I'm a New York City guy, so I guess I'm angry by nature, coming from up there. I'm a New York City guy, and they know when I'm angry. I think that -- because they understand I coach with a chip on my shoulder, no matter all the accolades I might have got in my career so far, still sometimes there's a lot of doubters.

There's doubters in the world because people think that, oh, he's just doing it in in the MEAC or he's just doing it in the HBCU, and that's a damn lie. We do it all across the country, against some of your favorite coaches have lost to Norfolk State.

It's just another opportunity to go out there with a chip on our shoulder, or my shoulder too, and show the world that it's different than what they think it is.

Shout out my son. He's next up right there. Next up, Player of the Year. Metro Conference Player of the Year right there, baby.

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