

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Clemson vs Alabama

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Crypto.com Arena

Clemson Tigers

Coach Brad Brownell

Joseph Girard III

Chase Hunter

PJ Hall

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

BRAD BROWNELL: Excited. Tremendous accomplishment, happy for our players. These guys have been unbelievable to coach all year, and certainly Chase and PJ have been with me for a long time. So very rewarding to get to this point. But don't want to stop now.

I think we're a hungry group that is playing really good basketball. We know we have a terrific opponent in Alabama. They played fantastic last night and beat a really good Chapel Hill team. We have our hands full, but we're excited for the opportunity.

Q. PJ, could you just talk a little bit about the magnitude of this moment, being a premier player on a team headed to the second Elite Eight in program history and obviously the local ties going to Droman High School growing up in the state of South Carolina.

PJ HALL: It's really cool, obviously. But growing up, I was never a huge basketball or sports watcher. I didn't realize the magnitude of what it would mean to a community to get to a spot like this and have the opportunity to go to the first Final Four for a school.

But now that I'm here and seeing how much excitement there is back home it's incredible the support we have. And it really speaks to the culture of Clemson and the culture of the community around there. It's a special place to play and to go to school. Like I said, it's incredible.

Q. Alabama's talked about they wanted to make the adjustments from what they saw in the first match-up



they played against you guys. When you guys are going over, like trying to talk about strategy for tomorrow, what are kind of some things you guys are trying to focus on so you guys cannot only beat them again but advance to your first Final Four?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I think for us it's kind of the same. Coach has talked to us a little bit since we found out that's who we were playing against, they're kind of a completely different team they were when we played them earlier. So are we.

But obviously there's advantages and disadvantages that you had in the first game that you can use. But, again, it's March now, and that was back in, what, November or December. So it's completely different teams but at the same time you just have to go in there, follow the game plan and make sure you do what you do.

Q. Last night's win was the 12th win away from home, set a school record. Curious, and a pretty heavy Arizona crowd. For your guys' mindset, what's it about those atmospheres that get you up to play?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: Playing away from home is a lot of fun, for me personally, I know these guys as well, especially with such an older group. You get used to those environments, but at the same time you thrive in them. We love playing at home, love playing at Littlejohn in front of the fans. It's a lot of fun.

But sometimes when you can go on the road and play in a hostile environment it gets the juices flowing a little more. It gets you fired up. Last night was almost like an away game, like you said. We were just ready to go, fired up from the beginning and had the mindset that we were going to go in there and try to keep the crowd as quiet as we could.

Q. Chase, I remember talking to you in the preseason about conditioning and wanting to take that to another level, the ladder drills and all that. The way you've been able to play late in the season, do you think it has anything to do with upping that and being able to finish late in the games?



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CHASE HUNTER: I would definitely give credit to conditioning. We did a lot of stuff this summer that was strenuous on us, and I think it kind of prepared us for the season. When you're playing throughout the season you kind of get more conditioned as the season goes. Now that we're in the later half of the season, my conditioning has definitely picked up and it's allowed me to play through full games.

Q. Joe, it wasn't your best shooting night last night, but you were able to impact the game with your passing and play making. What does that speak to you to even know you're kind of known as being a shooter that you're able to get the offense flowing?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: We have a lot of great players around me. These guys make my job so much easier, and if I can draw two defenders sometimes, whether it's off the ball or on the ball, and I know I've got four other great players who are out there and can put the ball in the hoop, it's a pretty easy job.

(Indiscernible) all tournament and it's helped us out a lot. That's why we're having so much success. But at the same time the other four guys out there are pretty good as well and know how to put the ball in the basket. It's a pretty easy game when it's 4-on-4.

Q. PJ, how do you not make this game bigger than it is? Obviously to have such a huge opportunity to get to a Final Four, how do you mentally focus yourself to not make it too big?

PJ HALL: For me, it's funny, I was talking to our (indiscernible) performance coach last night, whenever I'm on the court I really don't feel the magnitude of a game, whether it's in the Dean Dome or at Cameron, whenever I'm on the court it feels like I'm just playing, especially in a game like this. When you're home watching March Madness you feel the, oh, this is the Elite Eight, this is a big game.

But when you're going down the court and you're really just playing. And the crowds aren't insane it's not a true road game. It's an incredible environment, but being able to know that you're just out there playing ball and keeping calm, that's the best way to go out there and continue to have a steady pace.

Q. Describe to me the relationship that you have with Coach Brownell. Because each of you, different level. Each one of you, describe your relationship with Coach?

CHASE HUNTER: It's been a long journey for me and Coach. I came in as a freshman. Things didn't go as well for me. But I battled through some injuries. He was there by my side the whole time.

I think that through these five years I've learned a lot from him, whether it's X's and O's, on and off the court stuff. We've built this big relationship.

Now that we're here, it's crazy. It feels surreal to be in this moment after five years, to go through everything that we did. And I appreciate Coach for everything he's done for me. He's taught me a lot about the game.

JOSEPH GIRARD III: For me, obviously it's a lot different than these guys. I built a really good relationship with him and it was pretty fast. In the transfer portal I was obviously looking for a good team I could go to where I could make a run, but also wanted to go somewhere where I'd have a relationship with the coach for not just a year but for the rest of my life.

That was the guy that I put my trust and he put his trust in me as well. It's been nothing short. I know I'll talk to Coach Brownell forever, and I have a lot of faith in what he does for me on and off the court because obviously he's made me a better player, but a better person as well.

PJ HALL: I'm in the same boat as Chase with how long I've been here with him. Also I've battled some injuries and didn't play much my freshman year either. It wasn't like necessarily I was coming in right away and making an impact.

Having that support from him the last four years it was always there and it always knew it was -- made it known. We're on two opposite ends of the spectrum of detail oriented how we go about things. It's funny, like, you have that but also we're right next to each other in being competitive and ready to go out there and fight.

So that dynamic is really funny. You see that in a game. When he's up in my face and I'm out there trying to get the crowd going, and he's trying to calm me down. It's definitely a yin and yang.

But it's special, and coming to Clemson and playing for him is something I would never change.

Q. Chase, just take me through what was it like to see your younger brother get the crucial steal and the and-one?

CHASE HUNTER: It was big for our family. I looked in the crowd, looked up and saw my mom and she was going

crazy up there.

Definitely a surreal moment. Seeing the videos and stuff, it's just crazy to be in this moment, to be in the Sweet 16 with my little brother. And he makes sort of the game-winning play to finish it. It was definitely surreal, like I said. I'm proud of him.

Q. Chase, we're both Atlanta natives. Could you talk about the magnitude, what it means for the city. Saw you posted on Instagram, a lot of people in the comments, obviously. And back home people showing love. Talk about Atlanta and what it means to the city?

CHASE HUNTER: It means a lot. A lot of our players are from Atlanta. I think I was kind of one of the first guys to start that pipeline. A lot of good guys have come to this team and have made a make a big impact.

For us to be putting on for our city means a lot. We all want to keep going and make more history. We're all proud. I'm proud of these guys that are from Atlanta on this team that have been making impacts in games. We're definitely proud. And we're going to keep putting on for the city for sure.

Q. Obviously this is the first time you're in the Elite Eight since the '79-'80 team. You being around Clemson for so long, has anyone from that team spoke to you about this moment? Obviously Larry Nance was on that team. Has anybody back then ever talked to you about playing on this team?

BRAD BROWNELL: Nobody on that team. Certainly a lot of players, some that I coached recently in the last 10, 12, 14 years, what not. But some other guys that are much older are certainly very proud.

And it's a great moment for our program. Certainly we want to keep going. But, yeah, taking these kinds of steps are big ones. We know that. And I think our alumni are very proud of what this team is about, both on and off the court.

Q. Chase, what are the difficulties guarding someone like Mark Sears? And maybe how has he grown throughout the season since the last time that you competed against him?

CHASE HUNTER: Yeah, definitely a great player, someone who can create plays for himself and create plays for himself. I think the big thing for me is just make sure I make things hard for him, not letting him get easy looks early. And just crowding him, like I've been doing the

whole season against other good guards I've played.

He's a great player, like I said. I haven't really watched much since we played them. But we dug into some film. Like I said, I'm going to make it hard for him and play as hard as I can on defense.

Q. Hopefully you guys have seen the footage of downtown Clemson last night. People just running wild in the streets and Littlejohn, blowing the roof off of that. What sort of energy does that give you for tomorrow knowing that everybody back home is absolutely losing it over this victory?

JOSEPH GIRARD III: It's really exciting just to see how much people really care about the way things are going for us in this program right now. And obviously everybody always talks about Clemson football and how big their support is. And knowing we're getting a lot of that right now, it feels great.

And Coach Brownell has built this program up. And having the (indiscernible) pit and Littlejohn and all those people there, to have support throughout all these years and throughout this run right now is unbelievable. Gives us another juice of energy to have it in the back of our minds to do it for them and hopefully keep this run rolling.

Q. PJ, you talked with your sports psychologist that's here with us. My guess is that he's asked you to see the moment, that he's asked you to look ahead and see yourself doing good things. So for the three of you, what are you all envisioning in your heads? What are you envisioning against Alabama tomorrow and how you see it playing out?

PJ HALL: I'm a big kind of think-ahead type person. Whenever I know an event is coming not, trying not to get too far ahead, but when I know a big game is coming up I'm thinking about the possible plays within the play.

But at the same time, like, you've also got to be able to live in the moment and not get ahead of yourself. One of the favorite things about the Michael Jordan documentary, "The Last Dance," it said he had what some people don't have, that he was present at all times. He was always right in his feet, in his footsteps, right there in the moment.

So being able to sit and keep your nerves calm and relaxed and know that, don't get ahead of yourself, go into these games with calm nerves, go out there and perform, that's a huge thing for me as well.

CHASE HUNTER: I think PJ said it well. Just don't get too ahead of yourself. Just live in the moment and realize



where we're at. We're in the Elite Eight, in a big game. To go to Final Four to make history for Clemson, that would be everything.

But we still have to go play the game. For us it's going into it with the same mindset we go into every game past. And when we do that we'll be able to say that we're in the Final Four.

JOSEPH GIRARD III: I agree with both those guys, different aspects. But I like to just be where I'm at, obviously not look too far ahead because that's when you can get tripped up.

Honestly, if you want to look at our season, we probably had a few of those moments where in the middle of the season, we're on an all-time high running. And might have looked too far ahead and got tripped up in some games where we shouldn't have or (indiscernible).

Just try to live in the moment because this doesn't come every year. This is my fifth year in college basketball and the first time I'm playing in the Elite Eight. Just gotta live in the moment and appreciate where you are. And at the same time know the magnitude of it and give it your all.

Q. Coach, you always spoke about how hard that you and your coaching staff works. Could you go in detail how each coach kind of helps you guys day in, day out for the preparation?

BRAD BROWNELL: Yeah, we split things up a good bit. Coach Bender and Coach Reynolds are in charge of the offense with me. So they're constantly working on game plans for that.

Coach Donlon and Coach Dixon are the defensive side of the ball. So every week I meet with them at the beginning and meet with Coach Bender and Coach Reynolds to work on the offensive game plan.

Obviously we've got a bunch of other guys behind the scenes doing a lot of different things that help supplement the staff. But you don't get to this point unless your staff is terrific. And I think Nate would say the same thing about his guys.

We just have experienced guys that have been through it. I'm very fortunate because I have some people that have been with me a long time. Coach Bender coached me in college. And I coached Coach Donlon. And Coach McKay was one of my managers at UNC Wilmington almost 20 years ago. Very family feel at Clemson basketball. A lot of trust in those guys.

Q. You mentioned Wilmington. How did working with Jerry Wainwright kind of shape your philosophy in being a head coach and prepare you when you stepped in that role?

BRAD BROWNELL: Coach Wainwright was terrific. I learned a lot. I've had a bunch of good mentors that worked for Jim Crews at the University of Evansville for a year. And I worked for my coach, Royce Waltman at the University of Indianapolis.

Then I got the opportunity to work for Coach Wainwright back in 1994, a restricted earnings coach. He just gave me a lot of freedom. I think philosophically we had a lot of the same ideas in terms of defense. He's a Midwest guy. He's from Chicago. I'm from Indiana.

We felt the game should be played a certain way. And so that part of it was easy for me, and he quickly kind of put me in charge of the defense, and I think that really helped me grow as a coach.

But more than that, I probably learned just more about how to run a program. He was a tremendous speaker, fundraiser, unbelievable relationships with the players, very good recruiter. And I just saw all the different things that he was good at. And I also saw the fact that he delegated. He gave his assistants freedom to be involved and obviously held us accountable. But I've taken some of that with me as well.

Again, you don't get to these points unless you work for really good folks. And I'm very blessed that he was one of my mentors.

Q. Coach Oats mentioned earlier that when you see Clemson and Alabama playing in Los Angeles you think it would be happening in the Rose Bowl. A lot of people online are saying, here we go, another Clemson-Alabama match-up, but this time it's in basketball. What's it mean to see a traditional -- or a school that's been known for football, to have a team like yours that's now having success in basketball? And how do you guys continue to manage, like, hey, we're a football school but also we're doing something big in basketball?

BRAD BROWNELL: The first thing you better realize, I'm sure Nate feels the same way, if you're the head basketball coach at Clemson or Alabama you're not going to become a basketball school. You're going to be a football school. You better embrace that early on.

That's OK with me. I'm great with that. I have a great relationship with Coach Swinney. I want us to be great at

everything, and we're really good at a lot of sports at Clemson.

There's pressure you feel because you want to have as good a program as the others coaches have. Coach Noonan in soccer has won national championships. We've got a great group of coaches in our athletic department.

Certainly we're known as a football school and will be one forever. And we're all really proud of that. But I'm just doing the best I can to make our program as good as it can be. And I'm proud of what we've been able to accomplish the last 14 years. And certainly this year has been really special.

Q. Over the course of the tournament, you guys have held your opponents to just less than 40 percent from the field. Is that a point of emphasis after that ACC loss?

BRAD BROWNELL: We haven't been -- I wouldn't say we're a defensive-minded group. I've got a lot of good offensive players. And I think a lot of times guys who are that way, their identity is with their offense. And certainly I embrace offense and want to be really good at both.

But there are times defensively we haven't been as good as we needed to be. And I have a saying that when it's harder than you want it to be, you find out a lot about how important something is to you.

And sometimes defense can be really hard. When it's harder than you want it to be sometimes you don't do it very well. And we've had some games like that.

I think the way we played in Washington, D.C. -- and we got humbled and did not play very well, probably our poorest performance of the season by far -- probably helped us a little bit because we went back to the practice and had two really hard days of practice on Saturday and Sunday leading into the tournament.

I think it helped me get their attention. We've had a little bit better competitive edge down the stretch. And certainly the good defense has helped us advance.

Q. In terms of Chase Hunter, you talked about early in his career, trying to take his focus away from the offensive end off and trying to get him to focus on defense. How much has that carried over into the player he is now? And stamina-wise, how much has he improved?

BRAD BROWNELL: He's improved a lot. That comes to my point of initially as a young player, especially Chase

was completely offensive minded. And it's been a process to get him to flip that because he's an outstanding defensive player as well.

One of the big changes is when we moved Chase to the point last year, one of the things you saw was -- and maybe I had to learn -- was that your point guard has to do a lot. Obviously handle the ball, get you into offense, all those things, deal with press.

But he's also got to probably guard about 50 ball screens. So there's a wearing effect there that sometimes if a guy hasn't played that position, that's different.

And I think Chase went through that a lot last year. I think he's much better this year. He's completely different. I think he's much stronger both mentally and physically and I think you see it in his play right now.

Q. Your parents were in the stands yesterday for the Sweet 16. Just how special it is to have them in attendance and have them follow along with you on this journey with your team?

BRAD BROWNELL: It's great. I'm blessed. Raised by two wonderful parents, and they've had the opportunity, since they retired, to follow our teams.

It started when I was at UNC Wilmington, they would come down there for three months. They did the same thing in a different way when I was at Wright State. And now obviously the 14 years I've been in Clemson, they've come down and gotten away from the weather.

And most of the times it was just to see their granddaughters, who were young at the time. Also my dad was a former high school coach. Loves to be around the game. My mom loves basketball. For them to get out of the weather and be able to spend time with their grandkids and occasionally me and go to games, and my dad goes to practices, it's what we've done, and certainly it's a great story, and for them to be a part of this with me is fantastic.

Q. Wanted to ask you about Joseph Girard's evolution as a defender. Obviously he's well known as an offensive guy. But coming to Clemson, not too familiar with playing man-to-man defense. How have you seen him progress on both sides of the court and just that evolution in the postseason?

BRAD BROWNELL: He's obviously very willing. He's one of those guys that wants to be good and knows if he's going to play for me that that's going to be part of the deal. And he's a competitive guy, so he's going to compete.

Obviously, like a lot of guys, he has some physical limitations, but he's also a bright guy, and he's a guy that can be a play ahead because of your basketball IQ.

I think he's learned a lot. I think it's certainly been very challenging for him in terms of a guy who hadn't played it in a long time. There's been some things he's had to catch up on. But a smart guy, tough, competitive guy who is willing -- is going to be fine. And he's done a very good job for us.

Q. Joe Girard yesterday got a Facetime call from Dabo in the locker room. How much have you been able to communicate with Dabo during this run and what's his words been to you like?

BRAD BROWNELL: Not a lot throughout the tournament. About three times yesterday leading into the game once or twice and then after the game got a text from him and then another text first thing this morning.

And I think there's a lot of jockeying going on between some of his friends who are Bama fans. There might be even a few dinners bet with some of his old cronies because he told me this morning that we really need to win.

But obviously we have a great relationship. He took me under his wing when I first got to Clemson he was maybe in year two.

We've spent a lot of time together over the years. He's a huge basketball fan and thinks he's a good player. He loves to play.

It's fun. We enjoy each other's company. We play golf some together. We have vacationed occasionally with each other and our families.

They're just great people. That's one of the best things about being at Clemson, is we just have so many good folks in our department, certainly in our community. You just really enjoy being a part of it. And Dabo is one of the guys that makes everybody feel welcome. We all know who he is and how famous he is and all that, but to us he's just a regular guy.

Q. Alabama finished strong the last two games, held it together down the stretch. I guess it was not the case through the non-conference schedule. What's changed about them and how do you potentially combat it?

BRAD BROWNELL: I think they've just gotten better. Some of it is Grant Nelson looks more comfortable.

Obviously the way he played in the last ten minutes of the game last night was remarkable. Probably made himself a lot of money.

We played him early on and he was still kind of feeling it out. I'm sure Nate was doing the same -- we're all trying to put our teams together. We think we're good at this; we're not sure about that.

They've just done an unbelievable job. Nate's done a terrific job at Alabama. The way they've played and what they accomplished the last several years, remarkable. I know how hard it is.

And their guys play with tremendous freedom and confidence against tremendous offensive swagger. They seem like they've gotten better defensively the longer the year's gone, which we all hope we do. But I just think it's a product of good coaching. And they're playing their best basketball right now when it matters most.

Q. In terms of the moment, obviously, Clemson's never been here before. What is your message to them in terms of how not to make it too big, how do you frame that for them?

BRAD BROWNELL: I've talked about this with our team for a long time this year. I told our team early on I thought we were good enough to make a Final Four. And it was really when we were struggling in January, and I was a little upset with them. I thought they were a little full of themselves. They weren't listening and being quite as coachable as they maybe should be at times.

We were different. We had a different feeling from November and December and, quite frankly, we got smacked in the mouth a few times.

We had a stretch where we were starting the league 4-6, and I told our guys this is a turning point, we go 4-6 down the stretch we won't make the tournament.

I said, I've only told two teams that I've coached at Clemson that I thought they were good enough. Our '18 team was good enough. And if Donte Grantham didn't tear his ACL, we might have made it. But my guys understand because I'm real with them. They know when I'm upset. They know it's straight talk.

And so I think they understood that and it hit home that, man, Coach thinks we'll really good but we're blowing this opportunity. We had to kind of like stick with it. There's going to be growing pains. There's going to be ups and downs during the seasons. And so I say that to say that this isn't the first time we've ever thought about it or talked

about it. It probably didn't seem realistic maybe back then and maybe it didn't seem realistic to some guys at the beginning of the tournament, especially after the ACC Tournament.

But there is a quiet confidence about our group. Our guys are good players. I think they know that. They know that I think they're good players.

When I think that we play the right way and play at a high level, we can play with just about anybody in the country. We've proven that. And we're certainly going to have to do it tomorrow to win.

Q. You've played Alabama a couple times now. I guess the last four years there's been some consistencies in the outcome, eight-point difference and you held them below their average. What's your been your key to beat a Nate Oats coached team?

BRAD BROWNELL: I don't know about all that. We played well. Those games don't matter. They really don't. I don't know that there's anything that we've done that's that special. Sometimes you're a little fortunate.

I think we've gotten our defense set and maybe guarded pretty well. But other than that, I don't know that we've done anything that other teams maybe in their league didn't do. Certainly been excited to play those teams and their games because of how good they are.

We just have a lot of respect for how good Alabama's been. When you get an opportunity to play good teams like Alabama, your guys are up for it. They're excited. But there's no specific coaching thing that we've done that's been any different than what other people have tried to do.

Q. You spoke about Grant and what are some of the things he's doing much better than the first time when you competed against him?

BRAD BROWNELL: Looks just more confident. Certainly was very aggressive last night, had a phenomenal year. Made a bunch of winning plays. I mean, he shoots the ball, he drives the ball with size. He plays with force. Defensively, he seems to have adjusted better to the level. I mean, it's a natural change that a lot of guys have to adapt to. He's just a terrific player. Man, is he good. And he's playing to his level.

Q. Joe Girard was obviously 1-for-5 last night, but on the inbounds pass that PJ dunked it, looked like his gravity kind of caught the defender and PJ was able to cut. How much does he open up things for you in terms of that?

BRAD BROWNELL: He does he does a lot. Just him being on the floor, he's going to be guarded hard. That's going to create space for Chase to drive or us to post Ian and PJ. It's natural. You've got to guard the guy because he has a quick trigger.

Obviously there's times in screening action when he draws two, to take away his shot, and sometimes you can slip. We got a couple of those last night, which were key down the stretch.

So his willingness to pass, his willingness -- when he's got two on the ball -- to get rid of it, his poise, I think you appreciate his basketball IQ when you see him every day as a player and are around him, he's got a really good feel for the game. And certainly those assists last night were a big part of the win.

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