

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - USC vs Clemson

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Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

## Clemson Tigers

## Demeara Hinds

## Mia Moore

## Taylor Johnson-Matthews

## Coach Shawn Poppie

### Media Conference

HE MODERATOR: Our next team in is the Clemson Tigers. Clemson went 21-11 this season. They were 11-7 in the ACC. They are the number 8 seed in the Sacramento 4 Regional. Joined today by student-athletes Demeara Hinds, Mia Moore and Taylor Johnson-Matthews. We'll go right to questions.

**Q. Mia, did you guys expect to be back down here in this arena for this tournament? Did you want a chip? What's your mindset heading into this game tomorrow?**

MIA MOORE: Yeah, we definitely thought we were going to be automobile to travel a little bit, but we're blessed to be here. We'll be able to get our fans here right down the road, really, so we're excited to have them cheering behind us tomorrow.

**Q. It's going to be a little bit word being the "home team" on your rival's court. Do you expect some South Carolina fans to show up just to boo y'all or do you think y'all will have the crowd tomorrow?**

DEMEARA HINDS: I think irregardless of where we're at, our fan base, our Clemson family is definitely going to be there to support us and rally us. The cheers are always louder than the boos. Regardless of what anybody else is doing, we know we have our support behind us.

THE MODERATOR: You have to believe there's a fair amount of Clemson fans that will make their way down here as well, right?



MIA MOORE: I definitely feel like there's going to be some South Carolina fans there, but I don't think they'll boo us. I think it's more so they're going to be scouting us to see who's going to play South Carolina on Monday.

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: Pretty much the same as theirs, our Clemson family is strong so I think it will definitely be more cheers than boos.

**Q. Just to followup on what you said, do you think maybe some Game Cock fans will cheer for you because they want to see you on Monday?**

MIA MOORE: I don't know about cheering, but I hope so just because we're both in South Carolina. So might as well go for the team that's also in the same state.

**Q. Just curious, what's your mindset going into this game? I know this is the first time the women's team has been back to this tournament since, I think, 2019: the mindset going into this? Excited? Nerves? What are the feelings?**

DEMEARA HINDS: I would say we're definitely excited especially because our team is very old. Not old, but we're very seasoned, I'll say that. It's a lot of seniors and we're definitely, this is our last opportunity to really make a run and kind of build a name for Clemson because that's what we all came here for. I would say it's more excited than anything of us just trying to put our names out there and show what we've been working on this entire season.

MIA MOORE: Yeah, definitely some nervous there but definitely a lot of excitement just because we haven't been here in seven years. So we're just blessed to be able to do it for the Clemson family, Clemson atmosphere, to put our name back on the map. Definitely excited and just ready to get out there and show the world what we can do.

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: Like they said, nervous, excitement. More excitement than anything. Mainly because most of us haven't been here before, so, yeah.



**Q. What do you guys know about Southern Cal? What have you seen out of them in these couple of days if preparation for them?**

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: I feel like that's giving out the scout report, y'all. (Laughter)

MIA MOORE: We just have to be disciplined. It's just going to come down to the little things and communicating with each other. So, yeah, just coming down to the little things and just playing as a team.

THE MODERATOR: Go along those lines, is there anybody that you have played in the ACC or your non-conference that reminds of you of what you have seen with Southern Cal that might help you in that? Demara, do you want to take that?

DEMEARA HINDS: I would say they're a very experience team, just as we are. They have different pieces of each team that's within the ACC and that we've kind of blended together in order to make a game plan on how to kind of attack them. I will say we do have to be disciplined as Mia said and just make sure we play at our pace and play our game throughout the entirety of the 40 minutes.

**Q. You guys being here is probably a surprise to some people. What's your mindset? Did you expect to be here before this season began? How did it play out for you guys that you were able to reach your goals and get where you wanted to be?**

MIA MOORE: I feel like we always knew that we were going to be able to reach the tournament this year. Coach Poppie has been instilling that in us since the summer. There is one day that really stuck out to me. One day he told us to look up into the rafters and that our name would be on that this year. That was just our main goal this year and we put the work in to do that, and it showed.

THE MODERATOR: Taylor, do you have anything to add?

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: No.

DEMEARA HINDS: Just going off what Mia said, I would say we reached our goal of trying to get our number on our season on that banner. We're definitely trying to push past that and get even further than what any other team has really done.

**Q. Mia, this one's for you. Particularly, what made you stay at Clemson to come here to be under Coach Poppie in his second year?**

MIA MOORE: Just the type of person he is. He cares

about you more than just a person rather than an athlete. The coaching staff is phenomenal. The Clemson atmosphere is unbelievable. The support system that we have there is the best that probably any school has. And, yeah, I just feel like it comes down to feeling at home and I definitely felt at home.

**Q. This is for Mia. Mia, I understand that your role changed somewhat from last year to this year. You were asked to more or less run the show on offense. How do you think that has panned out for you and how do you feel like that's played into your success this season?**

MIA MOORE: It hasn't been easy. When Coach Poppie told me that, I was kind of a little shaken up but it's worked out for the best. I knew that I wouldn't be able to fail under the coaching staff that we have. They've put in a lot of work to make me successful along with the team and so I feel like it's played out good just because I'm able to still attack the rim. I'm still able to find my open teammates. I don't really feel like it switched up my game a lot. I'm still able to do a lot of what I did last year just because he's allowed me to still be who I am and not just a typical point guard.

**Q. Just talking about from a losing season last year to an NCAA berth this year. Do you feel like your play there and the way the offense has played out with you running the show has contributed to that improvement this year?**

MIA MOORE: I feel like it's just the people that Coach Poppie and the coaching staff brought in. We came in with a belief and we stuck with it. That's why we got here today.

**Q. Talking a little bit about the culture and the chemistry that you guys have been able to cultivate, how have you guys become so close-knit with so many newcomers and transfer portal additions? And then to further that, how has that been a big part of your success this season?**

DEMEARA HINDS: I would say they definitely brought us in at a good time during the summer and made us do a -- well, not made us, but they encouraged us to do a lot of team bonding. I will say that really helped with us getting to know each other better a lot quicker than it would have been in other programs. I would say outside of what was kind of scheduled for us, we also made a lot of time on our own to get to know each other on deeper levels and more personal levels outside of basketball, just as human beings.

We have a lot of friendships on the team and everything

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

like that. We're very close. You can really go to anybody, go out to eat with anybody, do anything with any of your teammates and you know that everybody cares for each other outside of just our sport. So I feel like that helped a lot.

MIA MOORE: Yeah, I feel like it really just came naturally. It was never forced. We all just love each other and I feel like that really translated on to the court this year.

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: I would also say it wasn't forced. A lot of the coaches press that issue on you need to team bond, get together, but we were able to do it outside of them telling us to do it.

**Q. Just a followup for that. For Mia, Demeara, and then Tay, you as well. Injuries have been a big part of the story for you guys this season and playing through injuries. Do you feel like that wraps back to the culture and wanting to go to war each and every game for your sisters and how have you been able to overcome that injury adversity over the course of the season to still have success?**

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: We talk about sisterhood a lot so I feel like that has a lot to do with it, just wanting to play for one another and not thinking about ourselves and being selfish.

MIA MOORE: Yeah, I'm definitely one that's dealt with injuries. I feel like I'm very injury prone. We have our AT staff who are phenomenal at what they do. I'm always in treatment. Well, a lot of us are always in treatment because we're pretty old, but I just feel like it goes back to them, the support system that we have. They're going to do anything that they can do to make sure that we're healthy.

DEMEARA HINDS: Injuries or injuries aside, there's always somebody that can step up that day so it doesn't have to be the same people every day. We've definitely seen that throughout the season. It can be anybody's game for us and I feel like that's the beauty and the blessing of the team that Coach Poppie has put together.

**Q. Can you talk about that win against Duke like in the season? How big of a confidence booster was that now going into the tournament that you can compete against a big team like that and win?**

DEMEARA HINDS: I would say it was definitely a great confidence boost just for us to finally show people we belong in this space and we have been putting in the workday in and day out since the summertime and we know that we can for sure beat top teams and be in the top

with them.

MIA MOORE: Yeah, I agree. It was a confidence booster but we all had the belief that we can really beat anybody as long as we put our mind to it, as long as we show up that day, as long as we focus on the little things and play together as a team. We're a really good team if we're all buying in that day.

TAYLOR JOHNSON-MATTHEWS: For sure a confidence booster. It was just a matter of showing everybody else we could get it done. We knew we could do it all along.

**Q. Hinds, this is for you. Can you walk me through your match-up tomorrow against Jazzy Davidson and how that's going to be key to y'all's game?**

DEMEARA HINDS: I would say a lot of what we're doing for our game plan is just very team-focused, team-oriented. Helping each other and our sisterhood as we spoke about beforehand. There's a lot of mismatches that could happen or things in transition, so just making sure we have each other's back and everything like is really what we're mainly focused on.

THE MODERATOR: Anything else? Thank you, good luck tomorrow.

All right, joined now by head Coach Shawn Poppie. Coach, if you would, please make an opening statement.

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, super excited to be here. Obviously proud of the group we have in that locker room. Everything they've endured other the last whatever it is since June. We got a lot of new faces, but they came in here with a goal back in June and have given everything they possibly can for each other, for our program, for Clemson. To get to this point, we're honored and humbled and we're excited to, obviously, prepare today and prep as best as we can for a really good Southern Cal team tomorrow.

**Q. I know you guys are thrilled to be here, but with some of the locations around and maybe you want to take your kids to a place you haven't been. Would you maybe rather have not gone two hours down the road and got to go to another city?**

SHAWN POPPIE: You know, it's interesting. This is my third tournament out of four years being a head coach and you're getting ready to get your name called, you're prepared for what you think can happen and it's never been anywhere near. My first year, we went back to Blacksburg and had to play Kenny at Virginia Tech and then we went and played Wes at NC State. Again, that

was a Chattanooga tie. Now we got this story. So maybe I should just expect it. The good news is we knew our name was going to get called.

I think you try to look at as much positive as you can. First and foremost, we're two hours from home with the hopes of having some Clemson family in the stands, for them to be able to travel and then you look at the schedule and there's no home games this weekend down in Clemson, South Carolina so you're begging for them to all come.

But then you also have some familiarity. We've played in this arena earlier in the year so you try to lean on that experience. With the sense of being there, maybe not the result when we were in there, but, again, it's a little bit comfortable, although, yes, you would probably like to get all the glitz and glamour that comes with the NCAA Tournament instead of a two-hour bus ride. I thought our administration and staff did a phenomenal job with the sendoff and making this feel like a special event because our kids deserve it.

**Q. Your players were in here talking about the bonding and how it really helped this season. A lot of teams talk about that kind of stuff at the beginning of the season. What made it work for your players?**

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, it's that cliché, right? Teams that are still playing now, oh, we're the most bonded and we're together and all the stuff you here. You know, again, this is my second year at Clemson and we brought a ton of transfers this year one. That first year experience, when you bring in so many old kids in. One-year kids, they're old, they've been in college and you kind of just let them be in the summer. You're working out and you're just hoping it organically happens where they click and connect. That's what we did our first summer. I don't think we had a great bond that first year, so we kind of tried to change some things.

When they got on campus this summer, each week, one of them had awe signed that week that they had to do something that they enjoy and the took the whole team too. No coaches, just players. To here the stories of what they were doing. I remember hearing Rus -- we have docks right outside of our campus in Clemson. They went out there and watched the sunset and then wrote down some things on paper that they wanted to shred from their past, right?

It was more than just we're going to go sit at somebody's house. They really took it to heart and accepted the fact that they wanted to get to know each other. You can have the surface level stuff, but teams, we have in there, they genuinely know each other. They know about each other's

stories and what makes them click. What they're going there.

I thought back then we had a chance because they're going to deep dive into one another and really make this a family. I think that's what you're hearing when you think about what are they talking about? Everyone gets along. They genuinely love one eye and I think it started all the way back then. There was no pushback. There was no side eye. They got excited to go with each other and learn about each other.

**Q. Coach, your vision for the program and to be here in year two, your thoughts and just now to be on the stage and staying in the future, has everything come to how you thought it would be early on here?**

SHAWN POPPIE: Inside, whether it be our staff, our locker room, we thought we could get here no doubt. I'm not sure if anyone on the outside looking in genuinely thought we could be here in year two, so we're very proud of that. We probably are a year or two ahead of schedule since taking the job. I knew Clemson could be a special place and we could turn it into a special program with we have. It could be resources, obviously, unbelievable academics, a supportive administration. Those are the reasons we took the job.

But I give a lot of credit to this group and it goes back to what I talked about this summer. We may not have the most talent A to Z on our roster. We may not have the biggest roster, but we knew that if we would collectively come together, we had enough puzzle pieces that we could be here.

I think that going back to this group, because they got to know each other, we can look in the mirror through good and bad. That's what teams that are playing now, they do. I think it's why we have not lost two games in a row since the Alabama game in the SEC challenge. When things went bad, there was no pointing fingers, it was looking in the mirror and holding each other accountable, including me, right? I make plenty of mistakes.

Because we did that, we're here. I think what they've done is they laid the foundation to what Clemson and myself says we're going to be and now we're here. We don't have to sell we're going to be an NCAA Tournaments anymore. We're here. And now because we're here, why don't we keep competing and fighting and see how long we can stay.

This group will forever be -- I will be indebted to them for sure. They really exceeded expectations from the outside looking in but they haven't exceeded their own. We talked

about it in June. You do what we think we can, there will be a number up there on that banner saying 2026 and no one will ever be able to take that away from you. They will be able to come into Littlejohn for the rest of their lives and tell stories about what they did this year.

**Q. Going back to the oddness of playing on your rival's court. Obviously you expect a fair number of Clemson fans to come down and have that support. Do you respect, are you preparing the team that some South Carolina fans are going to hang around just to boo y'all or do you think maybe they'll low-key be cheering for you to advance and see South Carolina on Monday?**

SHAWN POPPIE: You know, that's a funny question, because that was -- we talked about that in my house, though. Not with my team. My wife asked the same dang question. Selection Sunday, we get home and she says, well, I'm curious... will they stick around and root for you. I don't know if South Carolina fans can genuinely do that. Or will they stick around and boo you? I don't know. Obviously they play before us tomorrow and I'm sure there will be a handful that stick around and I'm sure there will be a lot that leave out of excitement for whatever is next for them. Only thing we can control is ourselves and the fans that we do have. I know that there's a lot coming down here for what we were afforded in the sense of availability in tickets. We look forward to putting on for them and for everyone around watching.

**Q. You inherited a seven-win team at Chattanooga. Went 20 wins year one, NCAA Tournament. 28 wins year two, NCAA Tournament. Similar situation at Clemson. Inherited a 12-win team. Went 14 year one. Now 21 in year two with a NCAA Tournament. What is the key, without giving away your secret sauce, to getting buy-in from players at programs that might not traditionally be deemed as winners?**

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, that's a really good question. It really has nothing to do with me. It's who I've surrounded myself with. If I did anything right when I first got the Chattanooga job, was I did a really darn good job of hiring. I got the right people. I knew that was important. I watched that at Virginia Tech and watching Kenny and the staff he put together when we first got the job. You're only as good as who you surround yourself with. I hit a home run in hiring in Chattanooga.

If you look at my staff now, I brought everybody with me. They're still with us and we're growing together. And then we have the additions, obviously. Chris Ayers and Sydni Means that have just added to that group.

What happens there is you've got the same voice going into the ears of our young people every day coming from different personalities. If you watch our staff, we got a bunch of different personalities, but the message being shared is the same. All while I think they were very connected with our players. Relationships matter in our program. It's not -- you're not going to come to Clemson and it's going to be just about what we're giving you money and what are you doing in production? We care just as much for Morgan Miller who may not play as many minutes as we do Rachael Rose and Mia Moore. Relationships matter and when you surround yourself with people, I'm only as successful as they've allowed this program to be.

I think we've developed young people and we've built their confidence. They're hearing messages of, obviously, accountability but they know there's a lot of love followed behind it. We put a lot of hours on that court with them and then the final piece is you got to get it right with who you're bringing in the locker room.

I think that we did an unbelievable job in this recruiting cycle to get the right people in there that messed together, that their personalities mesh together, although they're not all the same, there's a lot of respect for one another and love. So you combine all that and set your aspirations and dreams high and don't let anyone tell you anything different. That's been a talk we've had since the beginning. Let's be delusional. Be delusional. No one thinks it, but we'll be delusional.

Candidly, I'm sitting up here and you look at the roster of Southern Cal and we're delusional thinking we should win tomorrow, right? All them McDonald's All-Americans, all the NIL money, all that stuff, right? But there's no one in that locker room who doesn't believe we're going to win tomorrow. I think when you collectively talk about it, be honest about it, it's why we're sitting right here.

**Q. It's very easy to say one game at a time, but by nature of a bracket, you're looking at the next game. How do you make sure your players haven't been looking ahead?**

SHAWN POPPIE: You watch film of how good Southern Cal is and you don't got to think about anything past that. I think maybe in a different situation where maybe the match-up is different for us in a first round you would look past that but Southern Cal is good. They got talent all over the court. They're long. We got our hands full tomorrow and so I think that's helped. I don't think we've had to even talk too much about what could be after this round. It's one at a time. That would be your normal talk but because they're so darn good I don't think --

You know? Let me go backwards here. Maybe initially, right? When our kids see South Carolina, oh, man, they beat us, we have a chance to get back at -- you know all that. It's emotional. We had just heard our name called. We only have three kids that have ever been here and two of them came with me from Chattanooga. They were on such an emotional high but I think when you sit back and start to dig in of who we have in this first round, it's far, far away to think who's in the second round when we have an opponent as good as we have in this opening round.

**Q. I was going to get you to talk a little bit about Southern Cal and what they bring to the table, what have you seen these last few days.**

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, they're adds good as we've played all year defensively. They pressure you. They use their length. I think maybe a good thing for us is we just played Duke and it's very similar strategically of how they guard you. They'll pick you up mostly full court. Be physical. Try to blow your ball screen stuff up.

Obviously Duke maybe -- they threw it inside a little bit more in a sense of obviously to Toby. Where offensively, I think that Southern Cal comes at you a little bit faster than Duke. Although Duke tries to play fast. It's a little more methodical in the half court and that's not in a bad way, but Southern Cal has play-makers out there.

And then they play just a bunch of mismatches. Obviously Jazzy is just really darn good and if she gets to her spot she's even better. But in their three and four positions, they're just unorthodox between obviously Smith and Dunn and we got a little familiarity with Dunn with her time at Georgia Tech and she was similar there. Like do you put a guard on her? Do you put a forward on her? When they put them in ball screens, what do you do?

They just put you in some spots where you can't tell your kids they're going to go A to B, B to C because they're just play-makers, and so we're going to have to be ultra good at communicating tomorrow in some of them actions. With that said, we're going to have to be better offensively than we were.

The good news is for us for the first time in a month and a half we practiced with our full roster. Mia Moore hasn't been out there since Syracuse. Rachael Rose has been in and out most of this time. So we've had our team to practice for the last handful of days.

And you also had a chance to look in the mirror a little bit. So I think we can look back to Duke and see some good that we did and can that then work again tomorrow against Southern Cal because the similarities they have on the

defensive side?

And then what do we have to be a heck of a lot better at? We put the ball on the floor way too much against Duke and if we try to do that tomorrow, we got no chance. They are really, really good one-on-one defenders. We got to move them around, screen them, spread them out as much as we can to create some openings.

**Q. You shared your delusional confidence earlier and I'm sure you may have used that against Duke in that big win for y'all late in the season. How are you going to use that tomorrow against USC with the similar match-ups?**

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, because it's been a common theme for us, we're not scared to talk about it, right? Mia probably is up there with them. The rest of us, I don't know. That's okay because ultimately if we play Clemson women's basketball, there's no doubt we feel like we can compete with anyone.

It's not having to -- I think the thing about Duke and some others, you beat Notre Dame at Notre Dame, NC State early in the year. We have been very competitive in the high level games. Those experiences give you confidence. So there's no convincing that we can beat Southern Cal. Just what is it going to take to beat them?

Not that I'm rooting for them because they play our men today, but Iowa's head coach talked about your preparation in this is what's going to -- this moment won't ever be too big because you're so invested into your preparation. That's what it's going to take for this group. How we prepare. We know that is why we will be competitive tomorrow, not because we're just rolling the balls out and more talented than them.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about the senior leadership on this year's team and how that I have really rallied the troops from a culture standpoint and how that's impacted a great season for you and the Tigers?**

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, I wouldn't say we have just one true leader. I think we got a team full of them. It starts with that senior class. Mia, obviously, has had an unbelievable year for us and her confidence has just grown and grown and grown throughout the year. So I think her leadership, although she has a voice, it's just her presence, right? Everyone around our group knows how good she is and if she's out there moving around and has a good spirit to her, we feel confident.

Rachael Rose is our competitor. She will run through that wall back behind you and if I asked her to, that's what she

would true to do. I think when you have that walking through the room every day, it races everyone else's competition level.

D is more of our mama on the team, grandma on the team. She's in her sixth year. She's got a calming presence to her. Sometimes that may be yelling and sometimes it may just be a hug, but because it's grandma, we listen, right?

And then Raven has the experience. She's played with me all four years. My first four-year kid. Maybe when I'm going crazy and it sounds confusing to them she can say this is what he's trying to say.

So I think we have a bunch of different forms of leadership. I wouldn't say we have one leader in there, which has been a lot of fun. They can lean on each other. I can continue on. Hadley Periman is another one in there that has a strong voice. But ultimately, again, it's whatever they feel like needs to be held accountable and they got a good feel of one at. When do we need to scream at one another? When do we need to give hugs? When do we need to uplift? They've done a phenomenal job of collectively leading as the years went on.

**Q. Your players talked a lot about the culture that y'all have cultivated within the program and having lived in South Carolina for a long time, culture of women's basketball at Clemson has been basically not very good for about 20 years. Four coaches before you tried and didn't have any success. Now you're having success. Two questions, really: Why do you think that is the case that you've been able to do what others have not been able to do? And when you were considering this job, because I know you had other possible jobs to go after UTC's success. What did you see at Clemson that said to you this is where I want to land and I can build something there?**

SHAWN POPPIE: Yeah, really good question. I think it's no different than recruiting. Everything is about fit. Culture, family, togetherness, through my time at Virginia Tech and my two years at Chattanooga, that's what we preached, what we tried to live while we develop young people.

And then you got to fiend the perfect fit. I said it as we spoke to some donors and support in our team at the Selection Show, it's just been a perfect marriage. Everything that Graham and his administration sold to me when they approached me about this job felt like it could be a perfect marriage. A perfect fit for what they believed in, what I believe in, and it's transpired that way. We just fit at Clemson. With how things are done, what we believe in.

And then they've been behind us every step of the way through good and bad. You just look around. The likes of Brad Brownell, I think there's so many similarities between his program and ours and if we can have half the success of his, we'll been pretty good.

Dabo with football. They opened their arms to us and been with us every step of the way. I could go on and on through all the programs. So I think it's just been a perfect fit. No different than when you see certain players find the right program that allows them to be them and ultimately you see a lot of success. So I have nothing but belief in what I do and what we do and I think that matches exactly what our administration, obviously with the leader in Graham Neff.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, thank you.

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