



2023-24 CLEMSON BASKETBALL  
**CLIPS FILE**

## Clemson's PJ Hall, finally healthy, embraces slow grind toward NBA dream

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON SPORTS AND COURIER  
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CLEMSON — PJ Hall had a feeling one of his 3s at the G League Elite Camp was outlandish, but he gained a greater appreciation watching a replay with Clemson teammate Hunter Tyson after their 5-on-5 scrimmage.

Hall was a full five or six steps back from the top of the key when he released the shot. Fresh off a couple of makes, it was hard not to release a heat-check 3 with all the space he felt coming off a double-staggered screen.

"We were both like, 'Geez, I didn't know it was that far,'" Hall said. "I'm telling you, when I'm on the court, it's sometimes a detriment, I just (have) blinders."

Even if Hall knew in his gut he wanted to return to Clemson for his senior season, he didn't dip his toes into NBA waters lightly.

Working out for scouts while maintaining his eligibility, Hall sought to fully showcase his deep range, his athleticism up and down the floor, blocking shots. He wanted, along with the 6-8 forward Tyson, to make it out of the G League Elite Camp and earn an invite for the remainder of the NBA Combine.

He did all of that, which created a nervous wait for Clemson. Tyson, a fifth-year senior whose astronomical development landed him on a pro track, was certainly gone. But the Tigers weren't expecting to lose their sweet-shooting big man, and Hall was shooting all too well in Chicago.

Once the blinders were off, though, Hall and Tyson's path split. Tyson became the No. 37 pick of the draft to the NBA champion Denver Nuggets. Hall, despite his 25-foot, heat-check 3s, stuck to what was in his heart.

"I didn't want to leave," Hall said. "It would have had to have been 'Yeah, we're taking you first round,' something of that nature, and maybe even that wouldn't have gotten me out of here. I wasn't ready to become an adult, or do all that stuff, and move out."

"You gotta go when they're calling. At the same time, I love college, and I love Clemson."

There was more for Hall to accomplish in a senior season.

His sizable blip on the NBA radar just happened to coincide with his best physical condition in months — more accurately, years — as he finally regained his wind following an offseason knee injury and surgery. That immediately followed rehab from an offseason foot surgery.

Plus, Clemson's season had just ended in miserable fashion — a snub from the NCAA tournament, and one-and-done in the NIT because the Tigers sleep-walked to a home defeat against Morehead State.

"I've never felt, especially at Clemson, walking off the court — like, I was embarrassed," Hall said. "For it to be your shoulders, knowing it's not (head coach Brad) Brownell losing the game out there, it's the players ... it's hard."

"You have to deal with it like a man. You have to own up to it, and get better."

There are incredibly high hopes for what Hall, the ACC's runner-up for most-improved player as a sophomore despite foot inflammation, and third-team All-ACC as a junior despite a summer

completely blown by injury, can achieve when he's fully healthy and totally immersed in an offseason program.

When the Tigers held their "strongman" competition earlier this month, flipping tires and pushing cars stuck in neutral, Hall was the champion, furiously tearing his shirt off when he crossed the finish line.

"PJ has just battled and battled and battled," Brownell said. "This year, having had a healthy offseason, he's been a tremendous leader. He's always been a good worker. But he's finding his voice and confidence."

It's been a gift for Hall, who averaged 15.4 points and 5.6 rebounds per game last season, to actually build from one season to the next, not worrying about his health. Brownell will add that his affable big man wasn't just weighed down by poor conditioning last season, but was also emotionally drained as he reckoned with the death of a close family friend.

Hall is freer now.

"It feels relieving, just in my head, and physically," Hall said. "Being on the court, jumping around, and running, being in good shape, that was probably the most fun about it. Last year, I was struggling to get up and down the court."

"I was on one leg and turning into a little bit of baby fat. It was not fun."

The NBA's pre-draft process was also fun, though Hall doesn't expect Brownell to give him the green light for 25-foot 3-pointers.

Hall is mainly focused on quickening his feet, guarding perimeter players in a more position-less game. He's focused on pulling in more rebounds, which should happen naturally if Hall is stay on the floor for longer stretches as a senior.

He doesn't have to do everything, because Brownell worked the transfer portal and added veteran pieces in ex-Syracuse shooting guard Joseph Girard III and ex-N.C. State wing Jack Clark. But if he does enough, Clemson has a roster capable of ending a NCAA tournament drought.

And next offseason, Hall can actually answer the NBA's call.

"That'd be another checkmark off my list for my career," Hall said of his dream of being a first-round pick. "I was talking with Coach Brownell the other day. It's not going to happen; you gotta make it happen."

"It's more or less just every day, not looking at that, looking at what you can do today. Get better today. And what is the competition doing? Are you getting better than them? That slow grind is what's going to be important."

## Brownell previews length, leaders for 2023-24 season

BY CAMERON BURNETT, CLEMSON INSIDER  
OCTOBER 13, 2023

CLEMSON — Basketball season is on the horizon with Clemson's season opener Nov. 6. With less than a month of preparation left, head coach Brad Brownell addressed the media on all things Tigers hoops.

Last season had a bitter end, missing the NCAA Tournament when Clemson had done all they could to build a strong resume. Brownell discussed how he's put that behind him, yet it still lingers.

"I've put it behind me. There are still times it's frustrating but we're onto this year. We've got to move past it and can't worry so much about putting numbers out there. We've just got to try and handle our business and I think we're playing a very difficult schedule," Brownell said.

Switching gears into 2023-24, that challenging schedule can alleviate any possibility Clemson could be robbed if they "handle business" as Brownell said. Non-conference matchups feature Alabama, TCU and Memphis while ACC play presents a strong challenge as always.

Taking a look at this year's team, Brownell sees guards Joe Girard III and Chase Hunter as the leaders alongside star forward PJ Hall. He still wants more out of his senior guard, and even sent him to a leadership camp over the summer. That said, Brownell feels like there's a fire missing without Hunter Tyson.

"The one thing that we will miss with Hunter Tyson that is much more difficult now with young people that Hunter would do is Hunter was not afraid of confrontation. He was very aggressive and he had a dominant personality... it needs to be driven by the team, not the coaches if we're really going to be good, so there has to be a camaraderie there," Brownell said.

On top of the key leaders, depth is something that can be a strength for Clemson this season. Brownell is confident with the sophomores and the transfers. Forward Jack Clark is still working back, but Brownell likes the group up front.

The guards are obvious with Hunter and Girard, but the frontcourt is where the Tigers have grown. Chauncey Wiggins, Ian Schieffelin, RJ Godfrey, Bas Leyte and the aforementioned Hall are all players Brownell expects can make this team dynamic and big.

"I feel like yeah we've got great depth up front, which is important," Brownell said. "And we can do a couple things. We can play bigger which was really the big change in our team last year... it does give us five or six guys we can play across the front line, the wing area which gives us some size."

The lengthy Clemson Tigers open the season against Winthrop in Littlejohn Coliseum Nov. 6, where the depth and length will be on full display for the first time, tipping off at 7 p.m.

## New challenges await Clemson basketball star

BY CAMERON BURNETT, CLEMSON INSIDER  
OCTOBER 13, 2023

CLEMSON — The PJ Hall of 2022-23 is enough on his own for the Clemson basketball, but it's a new year with new challenges for the Tigers star. Last season, Hall averaged 15.3 points and 5.7 rebounds on 53.5% shooting en route to a third-team All-ACC selection.

Following his strong year, the NBA was an option but he's back for another year with a strong supporting cast under head coach Brad Brownell. As a senior, Hall has taken a larger role as a leader and it's key for this team which lost a vocal player in Hunter Tyson.

"Off the court, the leadership is big. He's got a big personality. Emotional guy, I think he's one of those guys that can rally the troops because he's respected as a player and person," Brownell said.

Clemson's head coach went on to talk about

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the “gifted” offensive talents. Even at his 6-foot-10 size, he’s very mobile and it’s something that was on full display during the pre-draft process.

Don’t expect pull up three’s from Hall, because his bread and butter is down in the lane. That doesn’t mean he’s not capable of it and his versatility will be on full display.

More often than on offense, Brownell wants it to translate into defense. It’s imperative in this Tigers program that everyone is capable of playing man-to-man efficiently, and Hall can be a target in pick-and-roll plays. The hope is for that to change in his senior season, and the aforementioned mobility mixed with extra work can make that happen.

“Moving better than he’s ever moved which I think is significant for us just in terms of being able to play some different defensive coverages. Got stuck a little bit. He just hasn’t been as mobile in the last couple years and it’s kind of forced our hand in some of the pick and roll coverages with him but we’re asking him to do a little bit more and he’s responding in that way,” Brownell said.

Rebounding is an extra challenge Clemson is adding to Hall’s plate, and Brownell believes he’ll be a “major leader.” With the additions like Joseph Girard III and Jack Clark to the rotation, the Tigers star delivering his best season can make Clemson a real threat in the ACC.

## New-look Tigers eye success a month out

BY IAN TAYLOR, SENECA JOURNAL  
OCTOBER 14, 2023

CLEMSON - Less than a month away from its Nov. 6 season opener against Winthrop at Littlejohn Coliseum, there’s optimism in the air about the Clemson men’s basketball team.

Despite missing out on an NCAA Tournament bid and losing in the first round of the NIT at home to Morehead State, a 14-6 mark in ACC play and a run to the ACC Tournament semifinals last season gives hope for a better 2023-24 campaign, even if the Tigers lost a major piece.

Hunter Tyson, the first-team All-ACC forward who averaged 15.5 points per game while leading the team in rebounds and steals, is now with the Denver Nuggets, but head coach Brad Brownell is confident in the Tigers’ pieces.

“It is a long, long preseason in college basketball, managing, getting your work in with also keeping everybody fresh and excited and in a good place is something I’ve got to be mindful of during this time. But just in terms of where we are, I’m really pleased, and our guys are really putting in a lot of time and good work,” he said on Thursday. Brownell noted that the offseason development of veterans like P.J. Hall, Chase Hunter and a now-healthy Alex Hemenway has been crucial for the Tigers, especially with them filling in the leadership roles.

Hemenway, limited to just 20 games last season and coming off the bench for 12 of them, said it was his nagging injuries that made him a better leader heading into his fifth season.

“Even when everything’s going well, you’ve always got to just make sure that everybody’s doing their job, make sure everything is going well and stays going well,” Hemenway said he learned from the sidelines. “It’s easy to kind of fall into a lull and get a little complacent.”

But if there’s any question as to whether the Tigers are complacent after last season’s success, junior forward Ian Schieffelin made it clear that Clemson isn’t relying on last year’s success.

“There’s definitely still that thing on our shoulder from last year,” he said. “We wanted to make the tournament, we ended up not making it and lost our first NIT game. I mean, we’re all hungry to get back to that spot, but finish it this year.” They are also hoping that a new addition will help alleviate Tyson’s loss and lift the Tigers to the next level. Former Syracuse guard Joe Girard III came to Clemson in the spring, bringing a wealth of experience that Brownell said is already showing on the practice court.

“It has been a little bit of a shock to the system. We probably play a little faster on offense, and then also defensively, all that man-to-man entails,” Brownell said, adding that Girard has gotten off to a great start on the court since arriving. “Attitude is great, competitive spirit great, and I thought last week he played really well, shot the ball really well.”

“Super excited to have him here.” “It’s been awesome so far, everything that I wished for, that thought it was going to be,” Girard added. “Guys have had open arms, teammates been great, coaches have been great, so nothing really to complain about at all so far.”

He said that between the welcome and his teammates’ experience going through the same ACC grind that he’s been on, it’s been an easy transition for the wing. His addition means that, alongside Hall, the Tigers have two of the top five returning scorers from the ACC, and the top two returning scorers from ACC play. A native New Yorker, Girard had a legendary high school career in his home state, being named Mr. New York Basketball and breaking Lance Stephenson’s record for career scoring before heading to Syracuse. There, he played 125 games over four years, averaging 13.2 points, 3.6 assists and 1.3 steals per game.

His decision to stay in his home state was in large part due to Jim Boeheim, the hall of fame and national championship-winning coach whose legendary tenure with the Orange came to an end last season after his 47th season.

While Brownell has yet to put together a resume like Boeheim’s, Girard said the two coaches compare favorably, “I think they’re more similar than they are different. Both are blue-collar guys who like people who work hard and are going to go out and compete each and every day,” Girard said. “Both are great coaches in their own right, and I’ve learned a lot, even in my short time here with coach Brownell, but I’ve learned a lot from both.” Prior to the season opener against Winthrop, the Tigers will host Newberry for an exhibition game on Nov. 1.

## 3-star CG Ace Buckner commits to Clemson, follows in father’s footsteps

BY JOE TIPTON, ON3  
OCTOBER 20, 2023

Ace Buckner, the son of former star Clemson basketball player Greg Buckner, has committed to play for Brad Brownell and the Tigers.

The 6-foot-1 combo guard out of La Lumiere (Ind.) School went in-depth on his decision with On3.

“Clemson for me has always been a dream,” Ace said to On3. “Being able to follow in my dad’s footsteps, but also paving my own way and making my own name at Clemson is big for me. But I didn’t want to just go here if it wasn’t the best situation for me. The moment I was offered by Coach Brownell and the staff I felt the love and how they treat their guys like family. And after my official visit, I knew that this was a school I could thrive at on and off the court. Very excited to get on campus next year and be a Tiger!”

According to the On3 Industry Rankings, Buckner is ranked as the No. 143 overall prospect in the 2024 cycle. The On3 Industry Ranking is a weighted average that utilizes all four major recruiting media companies.

Ace’s father, Greg, was a four-year starter for the Clemson Tigers from 1994-1998. In 1995, he was named ACC Rookie of the Year and was a two-time Second-team All-ACC Selection. Greg went on to get drafted by the Dallas Mavericks in 1998 as the 53rd overall pick. After a decade in the NBA, he retired and began coaching. He is now the associate head coach for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

## Four-star guard Del Jones commits to Clemson basketball’s 2024 recruiting class

BY CHRISTINA LONG, GREENVILLE NEWS  
OCTOBER 23, 2023

Clemson men’s basketball landed a big prospect Monday when four-star point guard Del Jones announced his commitment to coach Brad Brownell and the Tigers.

He chose Clemson over offers from Tennessee, West Virginia and Arizona State, among others. Clemson was the only official visit he took.

The 6-foot-2, 180-pounder is in his senior year at Compass Prep in Chandler, Arizona, but he is from Arlington, Virginia. He is the No. 90 overall player and No. 7 point guard in the Class of 2024, according to 247Sports Composite.

Jones is the third commitment in Clemson’s 2024 recruiting class, joining four-star forward Dallas Thomas from Arkansas and three-star guard Ace Buckner from Indiana. Buckner committed on Friday.

Jones’ commitment puts Clemson’s recruiting class at No. 11 nationally, per 247Sports Composite. It’s still early in the recruiting cycle, however; the regular signing period for the Class of 2024 doesn’t open until April. The early signing period begins Nov. 8.

## Brownell catching fire in 2024 recruiting class

BY CAMERON BURNETT, CLEMSON INSIDER  
OCTOBER 24, 2023

CLEMSON — Brad Brownell and the Clemson Tigers are set to field one of their best rosters in recent memory in 2023, but it doesn’t stop there. Additions like Joseph Girard III and Jack Clark came through the transfer portal, but it doesn’t mean Clemson isn’t building from the high school level.

If anything, Brownell is catching fire as a high school recruiter. For the 2024 class, the staff got started with four-star power forward Dallas Thomas, landing the Arkansas native in July.

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Considering Brownell's prowess in the transfer portal, it was going to be interesting to watch how aggressive he was at the high school level.

The month of October wrote that narrative in an instant. Clemson's guard class is already settled, landing the pair of four-star Del Jones and three-star Ace Buckner in the span of four days. The Tigers have only pulled in five high school recruits in the last two years, but the recipe is coming together for Brownell combining his recruiting excellence at both levels.

With the rapid boosts, Clemson finds themselves in the top half of the ACC in the 2024 class across 247Sports, On3 and Rivals rankings. Their highest is No. 11 on both of 247Sports' rankings, good for fourth in the conference.

Expectations are high for Brownell and the Tigers in 2023, and he's building for the future even with this key season approaching.

## Clemson Basketball Plans to 'Leave No Doubt'

BY CAMERON BURNETT, CLEMSON INSIDER  
OCTOBER 25, 2023

CHARLOTTE — The 2022-23 season came to a screeching halt for Clemson basketball, and it's a feeling that's stuck with this team heading into the season. While it's something they've put in the past to a degree, it's also a lesson and motivation to build into this season.

It's a very clear argument that the Tigers deserved to make the NCAA Tournament, but that can't be changed. What can be done is preparing for the 2023-24 season with that ending in mind and senior guard Chase Hunter talked at ACC Tipoff about how that possibility will be erased.

"I wouldn't say we weren't dialed in for lesser opponents but it's really just making sure that we make sure we are in our film, making sure we got our scouting report right, just the little things. It's something that we've harped on this summer," Hunter said.

It's not just the players that were on last year's team that understand that. Transfer guard Joseph Girard III has said on multiple occasions that Clemson should've made the tournament last season, but there's a new saying head coach Brad Brownell is stamping to make sure history isn't repeated.

"Coach Brownell has a saying each year and this year's saying is leave no doubt. Obviously, everything, the first thing you're going to think of is leave no doubt to making the tournament so that you're not on the bubble...leave no doubt that you're working the hardest. Leave no doubt that you're giving your best foot forward on every play and every effort so there's just a lot of things that go into it," Girard said.

At the center of it all is star center PJ Hall. He decided to return to the Tigers with unfinished business. That fire is the hottest with Hall, who didn't come back to see this team fail to reach its potential. For that matter, there's no bar too high for Clemson in 2023-24.

"I think about that just about any time we go to practice or inner squad or go scrimmage somebody, it's definitely a big fire for me and the whole team," Hall said. "The thing is everybody talks about you've got to make the tournament...that's not the goal, the goal is not to make the tournament. The goal is to make the Final Four

and then some. You want to continue to win, shoot for the moon and land amongst the stars."

## Clemson brings in Syracuse transfer Girard to add scoring punch to deep, experienced team

BY PETE IACOBELLI, ASSOCIATED PRESS  
OCTOBER 25, 2023

CLEMSON, S.C. (AP) — Joe Girard III found out quickly his latest ACC stop wasn't going to be like his last.

The Syracuse transfer recalls getting ready for his first day of class at Clemson and finding fresh-baked cookies outside his door with a note wishing him good luck at school.

"I'm not saying you don't get that in New York, but it was very few (and far) in between," said Girard, one of the most coveted portal players this past offseason.

Girard averaged 16.4 points last season as a senior for the Orange. He joins a Clemson group led by forward PJ Hall, who averaged 15.3 points a game, giving the Tigers two of the ACC's top returning scorers from last season.

Clemson coach Brad Brownell said the 6-foot-2 graduate student guard brings the experience of his four seasons at Syracuse, where doing things the right way on the court was a requirement if you were going to play. Girard made 88 3-pointers, more than anyone at Clemson last year, and has the savvy to bring the ball up the court, too.

Girard saw Clemson's positives, both when he was at Syracuse and on his offseason visit, Brownell said.

"I think we're respected in the league pretty well," Brownell said. "Like I think coaches and players in our league respect us and play against us for how we play and how we do things in our approach."

Girard and Syracuse reached the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament when he was a sophomore in 2021. He thinks Clemson, which didn't make the NAAs last year despite a 23-11 record and 14-6 mark in the ACC, has the pieces to make a solid tournament run this season.

"I haven't been able to get back there since and I've been kind of itching for it," Girard said. "I'm someone who loves to win and this team had a lot of wins last year."

"I just wanted to go somewhere where I knew I could get myself to play into March and prepare for a long, long season," he said.

### RETURNING PLAYERS

A big part of the Tigers will be Hall, the 6-foot-10 senior who was the team's top scorer and rebounder last season. Hall explored his NBA draft potential last spring before deciding on another season in college. Point guard Chase Hunter, who also averaged double-digit scoring (13.5 points a game) last fall, is also back and should form one of the ACC's top guard combos with Girard.

### PORTAL HELP

While other coaches on campus like football's Dabo Swinney have shied away from the portal, that's not the case for Brownell, who has used it to boost his roster quite often in his 14 seasons. Along with Girard from Syracuse, Clemson brought in Air Force guard Jake Heidbreder; and

a pair of 6-10 newcomers in Jack Clark who spent time at LaSalle and, most recently, North Carolina State, and Bas Leyte of UNC Greensboro.

### A YEAR AGO

Clemson looked like it had a case for the NCAA tourney last year with those 14 ACC victories, including a home win over Duke. But there were enough negatives on the Tigers' resume — a loss at struggling rival South Carolina early in the season — to relegate them to the NIT where they lost their opener to Morehead State. Brownell is emphasizing a strong start and no let downs on a team with 11 upperclassmen on the roster.

### RISING YOUNGSTERS

Clemson has been known for developing young, unheralded prepsters into all-ACC players like KJ McDaniels, Jaron Blossomgame, Amir Simms and Hunter Tyson. Brownell believes sophomores RJ Godfrey and Chaucey Wiggins could be the next on that track. Both were in the regular rotation a year ago and could play themselves into bigger roles this season. Godfrey is a 6-8 forward while Wiggins is among four players 6-10 or taller on the roster.

### THE SCHEDULE

Clemson has a handful of early tests, starting in a four-team tournament in Asheville, North Carolina, the first weekend of the season that includes Maryland and Davidson. The Tigers will go to Alabama in late November and have non-conference games with Memphis, TCU and rival South Carolina in December. ACC play starts in December at Pitt and kicks off in full at Miami on Jan. 3.

## Joe Girard loves it at Clemson. He has no regrets. But he wants people to understand one thing

BY DONNA DITOTA, SYRACUSE.COM  
OCTOBER 26, 2023

Charlotte, N.C. — Joe Girard wants people to understand there is no animosity.

The Glens Falls guard spent four seasons in Syracuse playing for the Orange. After Jim Boehm retired, and after Girard spent time thinking about what a fifth season of college basketball might look like for him, he entered the transfer portal.

He landed at Clemson, an ACC school.

His departure from Syracuse, he said, had everything to do with Boehm's retirement and with his own desire to expand his comfort zone and expose himself to something new.

He was here on Wednesday, at ACC Media Day, to talk about how it's going at Clemson. But he also wanted to make sure nobody got the wrong idea about why he left.

He greeted his former coach, Adrian Autry, with an inquiry about how his golf game has progressed. He fell into an easy banter, he said, with former teammates Benny Williams and Judah Mintz.

Girard said he still exchanges texts with Autry, with Gerry McNamara, with director of basketball operations Pete Corasaniti. Girard still connects with his former teammates from time to time on social media or through text messages.



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"I'll hit them up here or there and they'll hit me up here or there just messing with each other about life," Girard said. "I'm trying to shoot down any speculation that there was any animosity and I'm sure they are as well because there wasn't. It was a smooth transition and I love those guys. It's not like I'm just going to forget about them. I wish them well and the best basketball career that they can have."

Girard was one of three Clemson players invited by coach Brad Brownell to participate in media day. Reporters wanted to know why he left Syracuse, whether it would be awkward for him to play against the Orange this season, whether any hard feelings were developed when he left.

He reiterated his desire for change after Boeheim's retirement.

Girard had lived in New York his entire life. He wanted, he said, to try something new, to interact with different people in a completely different place.

"I'm 22 years old. I've been in New York for 22 years. I need to kind of experience life somewhere else for whenever the ball stops bouncing," he said. "Not that I really went home that much (when he was at Syracuse), but knowing that if I wanted to, I could get in the car and drive home in two hours. Not having that anymore, I kind of needed it to grow up a little bit."

He appreciates the open friendliness of the south, he said, the way random strangers greet him in a Starbucks and strike up conversation. "It's way different," he said.

His longtime girlfriend, Moonya, has moved with him to Clemson while she's pursuing an online master's degree from SU's Newhouse School of Public Communications. They live in an apartment on a lake, which appeals to Girard's love for swimming and water sports. Moonya's family, he said, has a house on Lake George, one of his favorite places.

The basketball, Girard said, has been equally enjoyable.

Clemson players, he said, quickly accepted him. He likes the team's chemistry, the way players do everything together, the bonds he's already made.

He expects to play on the ball and off the ball. He likes that Clemson can put five players on the floor that can handle the ball and make plays.

Chase Hunter, Clemson's point guard from last season, was a converted shooting guard/small forward. Brownell said he will use Hunter and Girard in similar ways.

"Some of it will be dictated by who's guarding our guys," Brownell said. "Depending on who's guarding one or the other we might run one of them off screens and the other guy might be able to handle the ball a little easier against a little less pressure. That's the luxury of having good players."

Brownell said last year's Clemson team had capable scorers, but he believes Girard will help the Tigers generate more offense. He's hoping Clemson will be less of a grind-it-out team and more of a free-flowing offensive unit.

"I think Joe can score with the ball in his hands in pick and roll. He can score moving without the ball off screen action," Brownell said. "When you have a player who can do both, that's when they're an elite player. Chase and Joe are both guys that can play with the ball in their hands

and then also you can run them off screens and they can make a shot. There aren't many guys who can do both."

Hunter said he learned how frustrating it could be to guard Girard last season. He spent the entire game, he said, face-guarding Girard, who still managed double-figure scoring. (He had 11 points on 4-of-10 shooting.)

He's glad Girard is now a teammate.

"Going through this summer with him has been great. We've been jelling, hanging out," Hunter said. "We've been talking about basketball, talking about sports, different things off the field."

"What I love about him is he can score, but he can also create for others. I think that's something people don't think about with him. They only think he's a scorer. He's a great passer. He comes off the ball screens, skips it to me. I love that, being that I want to score, too. Yeah, I love playing with JG."

Girard is as prepared as he can be, he said, for the two meetings between Syracuse and Clemson this season.

He told reporters that during his Orange tenure, Syracuse never beat Clemson at Littlejohn and Clemson never beat Syracuse at the dome. (This is true.)

He acknowledges it will be "weird" to see his parents and his girlfriend sitting in the visitor's section of the JMA Wireless Dome when the Orange hosts the Tigers this season.

By the time the games against Syracuse start, he said, he will be so locked into the action, none of his Syracuse past will matter. None of the questions about his transfer will occur to him.

He's a competitor, he said. He wants to win.

He now wants to win for Clemson.

He has no regrets.

"Honestly Clemson has been the best spot for me," he said. "The players, the coaches have been nothing but open arms with me. All the guys hang out all the time, mess around with each other all the time. It's been great and the transition of it has been so easy."

## Clemson hopes a beefed-up slate improves NCAA tourney odds

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER  
OCTOBER 26, 2023

CHARLOTTE — The first question Clemson coach Brad Brownell received at Wednesday's ACC Tipoff was framed as "innocuous" by the questioner, but anyone who has followed the Tigers in recent months knew it was not.

Last season, Clemson just barely missed the NCAA tournament, mostly because of losses to teams valued poorly by statistical metrics. So when a reporter asked about the NET — a tool used by the tournament selection committee to sort "good" wins and "bad" losses — Brownell was careful.

"I don't want to say something that's going to put me in the crosshairs with the committee," Brownell said, only somewhat in jest.

In search of the Tigers' first March Madness berth since 2021, Brownell has been calculated. He has added opponents to Clemson's schedule that the NET model will probably like.

He just can't be sure, in October, whether he

will like how it all plays out.

"Someone told me we have a top-5 non-conference schedule," Brownell said, "which sounds great in spring and not so good in March."

Brownell has constructed a team that's viewed as a contender in the ACC, pairing veteran transfers Joseph Girard III (Syracuse) and Jack Clark (N.C. State) alongside a returning duo of PJ Hall and Chase Hunter.

The question now is how Clemson puts together a season that will ultimately be viewed as NCAA tournament worthy.

Last year, the Tigers' bubble burst as a result of unsightly non-conference losses to South Carolina and Loyola and ACC defeats to sub-.500 Boston College and Louisville. Hopes of playing TCU in a late-November tournament were squashed by a three-point loss to Iowa, instead pitting the Tigers against Cal and further sinking their strength of schedule.

This time around, Brownell has scheduled TCU, guaranteed, in a neutral site game in Toronto. He added home-and-home series with Boise State, an NCAA tourney team in back-to-back years, and Memphis, led by ex-NBA superstar Penny Hardaway.

Plus, the newly instituted ACC/SEC Challenge pits Clemson against Alabama — a team ranked No. 1 in the Associated Press poll at a point last season.

"The fact we have a good team, some people wanted to play us," Brownell said. "We've been trying as best we can, and some years you have a little more luck finding the right games."

Some of the equation is out of Clemson's control, which Brownell highlighted when he was asked about the ACC's scheduling model with Stanford, Cal, and SMU pushing the league to 18 teams.

Brownell would like to see ACC teams play 18 conference games, giving each team a rival to play twice — once at home, once on the road — with everyone else matching up once a year. In 2022-23, the Tigers played cellar-dweller teams like Georgia Tech and Florida State twice, but Duke only once.

"I'm the poster boy a little bit for the unbalanced schedule," Brownell said. "It's almost like we could have lost a game at Duke and got in (the NCAA tournament) versus losing at Louisville."

Luckily for the Tigers, or unluckily, they don't appear to have an easy start to the conference slate this season.

Clemson plays three of its first four games on the road, including trips to resurgent Miami and upstart Pitt. A perennial power, North Carolina, is the lone home game in that stretch. The Tigers only get one game apiece with Virginia and Duke, but UNC, Miami, Pitt, and N.C. State are home-and-away opponents.

Given how things turned out a season ago, the Tigers understand there is an urgency required in every game, in conference and out. Brownell feels just a bit anxious himself, because the deep, veteran roster he's constructed hasn't been completely healthy this preseason.

Clark, the wing from N.C. State, hasn't been able to practice 5-on-5 as he recovers from a second groin surgery. Senior guard Alex Hemenway, recovered from plantar fasciitis that plagued him last year, has been dealing with other issues, most recently a hamstring pull.

Not to mention, Girard and sophomore forward RJ Godfrey have rolled ankles.

"It's been a little frustrating, you get all your toys, and you want to play with them all and understand, hey, these guys, let's see what they can do and mix and match," Brownell said, noting that he also has to monitor "wear and tear" on players who have been able to practice every day.

"That has been a little frustrating for the head coach," he continued. "But I do think we're turning the corner."

Clemson is scheduled to have its first "secret" scrimmage in the coming days, and Brownell expects to be down at least a couple of contributors from a team that could rotate 10 or 11 players, when healthy.

In theory, the Tigers should be difficult to defend, because anyone who wants to take away Hall is going to get hit by 3s from Girard. And anyone who wants to stretch out and smother Girard on the perimeter has to deal with Hall posting up and Hunter driving the lane.

But that's just a theory.

Clemson has to execute, game in, game out, when the ball finally tips.

Brownell has to hope he scheduled a strong enough slate, but not too strong.

"You don't get too far beating Duke, it's one for everybody," Brownell said. "Being focused enough to be prepared for every one of those (ACC teams) is what we're trying to get done."

## Former Lion Latiff scores in Clemson debut, shares floor with Taylor

BY ERIC SPROTT, SENECA JOURNAL  
NOVEMBER 2, 2023

CLEMSON — His first shot was off the mark, but after hitting the back of the rim, Andrew Latiff knew he was close to finding the bottom of the net.

His next two efforts on Wednesday night against Newberry were also off target, but in his Clemson debut, Latiff was settling in — no small feat given the magnitude of the moment for the homegrown product.

"The nerves kind of flushed out after I shot it even though I missed, and I just kept letting them rip," he said.

The fourth time was the charm, as the Daniel High School graduate sank his final long-range effort of the night in the waning moments of the Tigers' 90-39 exhibition victory over the visiting Wolves, eliciting a huge response from his Clemson teammates and a large contingent of friends and family near the team's bench in Littlejohn Coliseum.

In addition to the three-point basket, Latiff logged two rebounds and an assist in three minutes of action as part of a night he called "surreal" after growing up having attends hundreds of games from the stands. He had particularly good seats the last two years — serving as a student manager after a year spent as a preferred walk-on at the College of Charleston — but there was simply no beating the experience he enjoyed Wednesday night.

"I've been working for this for two to three years now, so just to get to this point was a lot, but I'm glad I stuck with it," he said.

"It's special," Clemson sophomore R.J. Godfrey added. "Tiff was a manager, and you

see the work he puts in outside of practice. It's just special to see, especially because he's from Daniel. Just seeing a hometown kid score is really amazing."

Add in the fact Latiff got to share the floor with his former backcourt mate at Daniel and current Newberry sophomore Bobby Taylor, and the evening would have been hard to top.

"That was just the icing on the cake," Latiff said. "My first game gets to be against my high school point guard, and we got to see the floor at the same time and we guarded each other for a little bit. That was truly just special and just amazing. I wouldn't have wanted to share the floor with anyone else tonight."

"He's like a big brother to me," Taylor added.

"Just to share the floor with him, even on the opposite end — and we always did wish to play with each other, but it came like this — it was fun."

Latiff's journey to this point has been an interesting one, as he headed to the coast after teaming with Taylor to help the lead the Lions to a 23-6 record as a senior during the 2019-20 season, when Taylor — a two-time all-state and four-time all-region selection at Daniel — was a sophomore.

But after Charleston head coach Earl Grant took the head job at Boston College in March of 2021, Latiff decided to come home and latch on with the Tigers, providing managerial duties — complete with running on the scout team during practice — for two years.

"I was just throwing my body around for two years trying to make the guys better," he said.

And that he did, as Clemson head coach Brad Brownell said Latiff's prowess from behind the arc has proven valuable in practice.

"It's fun to watch him, and I tell everybody he's an unbelievable scout guy for us because he has that trigger, and he's going to get shots up quick, much like he did today," he said.

And much like Latiff's teammates and his supporters in the stands, Brownell added it was special to watch Latiff see the floor and contribute in the Tigers' final tuneup for the regular season.

"He's kind of earned his way onto the team, which I think makes everything more meaningful," Brownell said. "I'm really proud of him for that, because he's had to put in a lot of hard work behind the scenes, and this means a lot for him. He grew up in Clemson, and it's probably been a dream of his to put on a jersey, and he's certainly earned it."

"It's fun to see, and you're happy to help a guy have a dream and make it a reality."

Meanwhile, Taylor is looking to make waves in his second season with the Wolves after redshirting a season ago. In 18 minutes off the bench against the Tigers, he hit a pair of free throws while registering two rebounds, one assist and one steal, and although the Tigers ran away with the win, Taylor enjoyed his homecoming on Wednesday.

"It was a great feeling coming in and seeing the hometown again, so it was great to be back," he said. "I used to come to a whole lot of games. I got to play on that floor tonight, and I thank God for that after being a kid growing up here."

Among those in the stands keeping close tabs on both Latiff and Taylor on Wednesday was Daniel head coach Ben Touchberry, who was beaming with pride watching two of his former players in

action.

"What an amazing time it is for our program to see two great players from Daniel High School competing on the same floor together in the same area they grew up in," Touchberry said. "It's not only awesome to see these two young men in college uniforms playing against each other, but it is even better to see how hard they've worked over the course of many, many years to obtain this goal and dream of theirs — playing at the next level. Not only do they represent our basketball program here at Daniel, but they are a positive representation of what great character and integrity look like."

"To say I am proud of both of these young men would be an understatement."

## College Basketball Preview: Transfer Joe Girard brings Clemson 3s and fire

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER  
NOVEMBER 3, 2023

CLEMSON — A rumor about Joe Girard's 3-point skills began to circulate as media members met with Clemson players and coaches at the ACC Tipoff.

Was it true that the Tigers' newly minted sniper sank 93 shots from beyond the arc in the program's "Houston 100" drill?

A 93-of-100 performance begged for confirmation, but Girard set the record straight.

"Ninety-four," Girard said. "Who screwed me out of one? Coach Brownell?"

Girard, who transferred from Syracuse this off-season, doesn't like to be cheated. He also didn't like how much, during the recruiting process, Clemson coach Brad Brownell liked to repeat alum Hunter Tyson's record in the drill.

"I kept in my brain, him telling me 'Hunter Tyson did this ... Hunter Tyson's got this right here ...,'" Girard said. "It just kept eating away at me."

By the time he had his crack at the Houston 100, Girard showed what he might be able to provide Clemson in Tyson's stead — not only some 3-point shooting, but a competitiveness that doesn't like coming up short.

Girard came to Clemson because he saw a program, despite back-to-back NCAA tournament misses, that can get him back to March Madness. A renowned sniper who scored 16.4 points per game in the ACC last season also liked the idea of honing his man-to-man defense with the Tigers before jumping to pro ball.

But, yes, his shooting hasn't waned. In just his second run through the Houston 100, he missed only a half-dozen shots.

He made sure Brownell knew it, too.

"Alright, coach, enough hearing about that Hunter Tyson record," Girard said. "Here's your new record."

The arrival of Girard, along with grad transfer wing Jack Clark, and the return of proven starters PJ Hall and Chase Hunter, bolsters Clemson's prospects in 2023-24 season coming off a NCAA tourney miss and a one-and-done in the NIT.

Brownell has a track record of finding useful pieces in the transfer portal, including 3-point shooting from College of Charleston and Boston College guard Brevin Galloway a year ago. But Girard takes that to another level.

"No knock to Brevin," Hunter said, smirking a

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bit, “but I would definitely say JG is a better shooter. But he’s also a guy that can create for others.”

Girard is also a leader, a state champion quarterback who broke Lance Stephenson’s New York state scoring record on the hardwood with 2,946 points. His path out of Glens Falls took him to Syracuse, three hours to the west.

But after Jim Boenheim retired, Girard wanted something new. There was distance between Glens Falls and Syracuse, but he still knew he could drive home any day.

“You don’t ever want to do anything on your own, that’s when you get yourself in trouble. But I just wanted to prove to myself I can do it on my own, I can live a lifestyle where I’m not reliant on people to be so close,” Girard said.

Clemson is different. On the first day of the fall semester, Girard stepped outside and found homemade sugar cookies at his door, from an unknown person, wishing him luck.

That would never happen in New York.

But there have been challenges, too. He already knew what they would be, having brought the ball up the floor against a pestering man-to-man defender like Hunter in ACC matchups.

Stepping out of Syracuse’s 2-3 zone and into Brownell’s system required a new level of conditioning to play well on both ends. There are nuances schematically, as well, but Girard’s experience helps.

“If we’re giving him clues, this leads to this, and this is maybe how you cheat that, that’s going to be helpful to him,” Brownell said. “He’s a competitive guy. ... He’s a very eager student.”

His competitive spirit, and his voice, might be as important as his shot in helping offset the loss of Tyson, who is now with the Denver Nuggets. Brownell thinks Girard’s teammates saw his grit this fall, returning from a nasty ankle sprain.

But Girard has asserted himself other ways. Forget 94 of 100 in a 3-point drill.

Ask the avid golfer for his record versus big man PJ Hall on the course, and Girard’s results are just as sensational.

“I’m 100-0 against PJ in golf, OK?” Girard said. “He’s gotten a lot better ... he’s not someone who is going to shank it around everywhere. But I would love to say I’m undefeated against PJ in golf. And others will attest to that.”

No one did.

But they will not deny the scoring punch Girard brings to the hardwood.

“Everyone already knows JG is a great player,” Hunter said. “It will be the same as last year when it was very tough for teams to guard us. Now we just have an even better piece in Joe Girard that can score even more.”

## Clemson basketball star PJ Hall discovers purpose in trying seasons

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER  
NOVEMBER 16, 2023

CLEMSON — PJ Hall needed to move on. But he left Clemson’s team hotel and landed on a beach in the Florida panhandle because he couldn’t figure out how.

He just couldn’t sleep on Nov. 25, 2022, after a three-point loss to Iowa in the Emerald Coast Classic. He was 0-of-2 from the floor. The 6-foot-10 center looked so lost, coach Brad Brownell yanked him off the court in the second half.

But this was just a low point in a series of them. First, an inflamed foot hobbled his sophomore season, even as Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski called him the “most improved player on the planet.” Then, he dislocated his kneecap in his very first practice back from foot surgery, which wiped out his entire pre-junior offseason and wrecked his conditioning.

He was a shell of himself physically, and Hall was emotionally drained as well. One of the most important men in his life, his girlfriend’s father, David Renwick, died just a week before the Tigers’ trip to Florida. Hall sat on the beach at midnight after the Iowa loss, asking himself, “Why am I here right now?”

“I just want to get home and get away from this,” Hall recalled thinking.

It was all so heavy for a fun-loving big man, who in his lightest moments will explain why he keeps treats in his car for strangers’ dogs and will argue that Dwight cutting off the CPR dummy’s face in the episode “Stress Relief” might be the best scene from *The Office*, if not the greatest TV scene ever.

Hall is like most 21-year-olds, only placed on a bigger stage. In the middle of a season, Clemson’s star player had to decide whether he was going to give up, or whether he was going to move on.

“The more you go through this kind of thing, the more it prepares you for the next,” Hall said. “There’s always going to be something harder to come. So you just have to keep on fighting.”

First, he slept off the Iowa loss.

Then, he woke up the next day and scored 10 points in 14 minutes versus Cal.

He got up every morning after that, through the ups and downs of a junior season that just missed the NCAA tournament, all the way through to his return to form at the NBA Draft Combine. In a 3-0 start to this season, Hall has healthy averages of 21.3 points and 7 rebounds per game.

Hall is powerfully dunking on rims, again, and confidently launching 3s. His smile is as wide as ever recalling “Stress Relief” and thinking about petting other people’s dogs. But he turns serious and intentional when he is asked about one of his biggest takeaways from the last couple of years — how he received an answer to his question, “Why am I here?”

“I want to make sure the recording gets this,” Hall said, bending down toward the interviewer’s microphone, “because this is for anyone who is going through any trial or wondering if they are on the right path.”

“God,” he said, “will show you.”

### Keeping the faith

It might be surprising to hear someone of Hall’s stature experience doubts about his basketball future. He was considered a top-100 prospect nationally out of Dorman High, and the No. 1 prospect in the state of South Carolina.

But it was Hall’s faith — willing to submit to a plan that wasn’t his own — which led him to these discussions with his mother Melanie. Especially when the foot problem was so swiftly followed by a knee injury, he questioned everything.

“You start wondering, ‘Is God trying to tell me something about basketball? What’s the lesson here?’” said Melanie, who played basketball and volleyball at College of Charleston. “When we don’t know, we start filling in blanks. Maybe God has a different plan for me.”

Hall wasn’t raised to just be a basketball player.

Some of his fondest memories as a child were on the road for travel baseball games with his father Jerome, his father’s friend David Renwick, and David’s son Jack. On their way to Cooperstown, PJ was convinced he left his cell phone at a 7/11 store an hour back. They were all peeved when they eventually found PJ’s phone between a seat and the center console.

Another time, PJ lost his batting bag. As David drove his friend’s 8-year-old son home, he asked “Is your dad gonna kill you when he finds out?”

“He’s not gonna kill me,” PJ said, “but I’m gonna be walking with a limp.”

Jerome, a former Wofford basketball player and college basketball official, wasn’t always easy on his kids. But David, an ex-captain of Wofford’s baseball team, was a softer place to land. He was like a second father because of how closely the Halls and Renwicks were intertwined.

The families were joined not only through the boys’ baseball games, but also their daughters’ volleyball matches and church services and Christmases.

PJ once decorated his room with an excessive amount of Gamecock paraphernalia as a prank because Jack was a diehard Clemson fan.

Jack’s twin, Anna, ended up on Clemson’s volleyball team. She is PJ’s girlfriend.

PJ just happened to grow up and become a Clemson basketball player. He hardly succeeded as a freshman, losing his confidence in a limited role behind veteran Aamir Simms.

Hall’s point production jumped from 3.5 per game to 15.5 as a sophomore, but he played two months on a bad left foot until his fourth metatarsal fractured in mid-February. He somehow managed to come back for three ACC tournament games and scored double figures in each.

He seemed as confident as ever following the foot surgery. Clemson posted a video of PJ tearing off his shirt, cathartically roaring after flips of a giant tire. But then his knee busted in his very first contact practice in July.

Was God trying to tell him something?

“I just talked with him about ‘Keep that faith going.’ There could be something else you’re being spared from,” Melanie said. “Don’t turn it into something that you’re thinking it might be, because you don’t know the answer.”

PJ kept his eyes pointed forward, returning for the second game of his junior season against rival South Carolina. The Tigers lost on a buzzer-beater.

Meanwhile, there was turbulence in PJ’s inner circle. His girlfriend Anna was ending her volleyball career because of issues with her hip. Anna’s brother, Jack, took a baseball in the eye during a Wofford baseball scrimmage and there were fears he’d never regain sight in it.

And then David and his wife, Susan, were going about their morning routine on Nov. 18, 2022. They let the dogs out. Susan made coffee for both of them.

“Then he went upstairs, and he didn’t come down,” Melanie said, choking up. “It was just so sudden.”

There is a hesitance on the Halls’ behalf to overemphasize their own pain, because they know the Renwicks have experienced so much more. But this loss, undoubtedly, weighed heavily on PJ.

He played against Bellarmine the night of David’s death, and then against Loyola Maryland



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three days later, and then Iowa in a non-conference tourney four days after that. Clemson coach Brad Brownell remembers hugging Melanie after the loss to the Hawkeyes, tears in her eyes.

Brownell tried to encourage PJ, telling him it was going to be OK.

But it was easier said than felt.

PJ will still grab a corner of his jersey to dab his eye as he recalls one visit home last season. Before he drove off for Clemson, he pulled alongside his mom, who was taking their dog Daisy for a walk. She asked if PJ was OK.

He bottom lip started to quiver. Tears rolled down his face.

He wasn't OK.

"Mom," he said, "can you just pray for me?"

## Finding purpose

PJ grieved as best he could, though it's hard to know whether he truly and fully could in the middle of a season.

He shed tears in Brownell's office. But Hall vividly recalls straight talk from his coach before the Cal game.

There was no time for a repeat of Iowa.

"It was like, 'Hey, you have to snap out of this,'" Hall said. "You have to figure out a way to channel this and get out of whatever you're going through."

Last season was a "straight, bumpy road," as Hall describes it. He just had to keep going, even if he was never 100 percent. One leg was totally atrophied while the other was chiseled up like granite.

He tried to recover his conditioning level, but the Tigers still lost to 10-21 Loyola, which would be one of the biggest strikes against their NCAA tournament resume. They started 10-1 in ACC play, but then they lost four out of five, including losses to sub-.500 squads Boston College and Louisville.

It was hard, and Hall had to live and learn.

"You see a guy in PJ Hall, big, strong, big personality," Brownell said. "But he's really a kid in some ways. These guys, emotionally, they are not as mature as we want them to be."

Off the court, those youthful bits of PJ are lovable. Brownell likes to talk about the time Hall, just out and about in Clemson, approached a random woman and offered to get a treat out of his car for her black lab.

That woman just happened to be friends with Brownell's wife, which is how he discovered his star big man was riding around with dog treats.

Melanie recalls a time when the Halls took a family photo, and PJ was captured wandering off like a 2-year-old because he saw a poodle in the distance.

There was this other time PJ was stopped at a traffic light, and he saw a dog sticking its head out a window. He yelled at the woman in the driver's seat, "Like your dog! Can I give him a treat?! ... Here you go!"

He's young at heart, but he has an older side. Hall will note he's always loved "old music" like John Mellencamp. He's been working on his golf game in recent months, too. He's long off the tee and terrible with the wedges.

But it's on the court where Brownell has seen some maturation. Clemson's coach will enter a huddle with a pregnant pause, just waiting for a player to say something. Hall fills Brownell's silences with the right words.

"PJ, right now, is the biggest voice on our team," Brownell said.

A likely future pro has taken the mantle from his former roommate on the road, current pro Hunter Tyson, who was already in bed when Hall returned to his hotel after the Iowa loss. Tyson was always the one telling Hall to shut the lights off, wanting to rise early for his pre-shoot-around coffee and flavorless oatmeal.

Tyson was consistent in presence and voice. Now, that veteran is PJ, who could be seen placing a finger over his mouth and shushing younger teammates when they were a bit rambunctious during an open practice.

Hall demands focus. He won't let go of last year's NIT loss to Morehead State — a result people mention, Hall says, and it feels like a "knife twist" — and Hall uses its memory to remind his teammates of what's at stake.

"A lot of us, this could be our last run. The way last season ended, nobody wants that again," Hall said. "So every practice, every workout, every lift, every time you go to get extra shots, every rep needs to be like you're trying to win the next game."

He's found purpose in the struggle of the last few years, not just in the ways it has fortified his mind. The doubts he had about his purpose as a basketball player, Hall believes he received an answer.

After games, he will sign autographs for young fans. If there are several, Hall signs only his name to make sure he can get to everyone. But if there are just three or four, he is intentional about adding a Bible verse, Psalms 108:13, "With God we will gain a victory."

A month before his senior season, Hall received a message from his girlfriend's mother, Susan. It was a picture of one of her friend's 8-year-old children, who received Hall's signature and cracked open his Bible to read Psalms 108:13.

"I was like, geez, it's crazy that I have this platform at 21 to spread the word of God," Hall said. "He didn't put me on this platform for no reason. Without a doubt in my mind, I'm definitely on the right track."

No doubt, it wasn't easy to get to this point. He missed prom. He missed so many Friday night football games, just to work on his basketball skills. And he's played so many basketball games in spite of pain, of one sort or another.

But now he's healthy. He's no longer in a place where he's wondering "What am I doing here?"

He feels like he knows.

"Knowing I made the right decision, being able to do this, is very freeing," Hall said. "I don't have that regret."

"Everything happens for a reason, and I know David is watching down on us right now."

## Clemson's Chauncey Wiggins, raised a shooter, starts hitting for Tigers

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER  
DECEMBER 24, 2023

CLEMSON — As steadily as Chauncey Wiggins grew into his 6-foot-10 frame, there was a mini-hoop expanding alongside him.

The pole on that toy hoop, decorated with a flaming basketball on the backboard, shrunk to its lowest level when it first entered the Wiggins

household in the early 2000s. Chauncey was just three years old, but his father, Michael, wanted to get his son working on his shooting form.

That's because Michael, who was a 6-foot-7 forward at Wichita State, had a two-handed jump shot all the way up until eighth grade. Michael wasn't going to allow his son to have the same weakness.

"We had him doing all these one-hand shooting drills," Michael said. "We'd be finished and 15 minutes later Chauncey wanted to do it again. It's all he wanted to do was drill. 'Daddy, daddy, let's do drills.'"

A proud father recounts the influence of that mini-hoop and those mini basketballs on Chauncey's shooting stroke, which is uncommonly smooth for an athlete his size. Michael's last picture of Chauncey shooting on a toy hoop is well into high school, aiming for a rim that just barely fits under the ceiling.

At the same time, Michael sometimes wonders if his son's love of shooting grew a little too large. He's nearing 6-11, and Chauncey, a sophomore at Clemson, averages a rebound less per game (2.7) than a 6-1 guard Joe Girard (3.7).

"I don't know, man. It's stressful," Michael said, laughing it off. "You look back on how you did things and how would you change what you thought was right when you were teaching him. Because I was naturally a rebounder. His mom was naturally a rebounder. But he just naturally doesn't go get the ball."

Chauncey's aggressiveness can wax and wane, but the strengths and weaknesses in his game only emphasize the sophomore's massive potential.

In the Tigers' two-point road loss at Memphis, Wiggins scored 19 points on 8-of-12 shooting, including 3 of 6 from beyond the arc. A player who averaged just 5.9 points per game going into the contest showed more aggression, dribbling and driving for pull-up jumpers rather than just standing on the wing.

Not only has Wiggins poured in 13.2 points per contest in his last five, but he has collected 13 of his 30 rebounds this season in No. 18 Clemson's last two outings.

Wiggins doesn't need to take all of Clemson's shots with PJ Hall and Girard in the mix, and he doesn't need to pull down every rebound with junior Ian Schieffelin dominating there. But Wiggins' upside has become evident, holding down the wing with sixth-year transfer Jack Clark sidelined by injury.

"He's gonna be a guy, a skilled player; we're trying to figure out different ways to use him to score throughout his career," Clemson coach Brad Brownell said. "That's what I saw when I recruited him, and I don't think that's gonna change."

## Hoops family

The shooter in Wiggins goes way, way back to that mini-hoop in his parents' house. Michael also has video of a 5-year-old Chauncey knocking down jumpers with ease at an actual gym, and even more video of a matured Chauncey seated on a high chair by their outdoor hoop, his feet hovering just above the concrete, flicking in shots with exaggerated wrist action.

Basketball was always Chauncey's love, which fit his household. Not only is he Michael's son, but his mother, LaWaynta Dawson Wiggins, was a 6-1



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forward inducted into Missouri State's athletics hall of fame in 2005.

Chauncey was tall like them, growing so steadily he needed new shoes every three or four months. Michael always had to bring his son's birth certificate with him, just in case other parents questioned his age.

Coaches would play Chauncey inside, because he was so big, but his natural inclinations led him to drift elsewhere.

"A shooter just finds that 3-point line some kind of way," Michael said.

Michael, who coached youth teams, had to make himself an assistant on Chauncey's squads because he found himself being too hard on his son. Michael not only taught his son to shoot, but also hammered home box-outs. Chauncey, a happy-go-lucky kid, just didn't always have the tenacity to go for the ball.

It was something father and son tried to acknowledge matter-of-factly. It came up as they sat in the driveway ahead of Chauncey's junior year of high school as he decided between a transfer to Grayson High or another school.

A future Clemson teammate in Schieffelin was a senior at Grayson.

"He's a great rebounder, he's a great glue guy," Michael said, "and you don't rebound, right?"

## Be aggressive

Wiggins and Schieffelin paired well at Grayson, helping the school to a third of five straight region titles. In his final season, Wiggins helped Grayson to a fourth, averaging 12.1 points, 6.6 rebounds, and 1.8 blocks per game.

"He was always tall and had guard skills. He just had to get comfortable growing into his body," Grayson coach Geoffrey Pierce said. "He used to take these short, choppy steps on sprints. Once he opened up his stride, he ran like a deer."

He had size, athleticism, basketball IQ. It can just take time for Chauncey to get comfortable on a team, to get out of his habit of standing around like a "robot," as Michael puts it, and start using his well-trained jump shot.

But it's not about scoring for Michael, who was a point-getter for Southwest DeKalb High back in his day. When Chauncey was recruited by Clemson, Michael told Brownell, "I've been trying to get this joker to rebound for 18 years."

"I don't really care about the scoring, I care about the aggressiveness," Michael said. "He has a high skill level. So if you're aggressive, you're gonna score. If you're aggressive, you're going to rebound."

Everyone can see the potential oozing out of Wiggins, a nearly 39-percent shooter from deep who has athleticism to guard on the perimeter at 6-10. His ability to handle the ball will only unlock other facets of his offensive game.

His aggressiveness builds, and he rebounds, too. It's been Clemson's intention to use Wiggins more in the paint offensively, as well.

"His size helps sometimes, because he can shoot over the top. I think where he's continuing to grow his game is attacking the basket, scoring with his back to the basket," Brownell said. "We've really spent a lot of time with him on all of those things and that's where his confidence has grown."

There are shots to be had because teams are doubling Hall underneath, or they are chasing

after Girard on a screen.

If Wiggins takes his shots, he hits. The sophomore went 0-of-1 in the first 18 minutes of a blowout over Queens (N.C.), but Wiggins added nine of his 13 points in the next four minutes of court time. He also finished with six rebounds.

Shooters shoot. Wiggins will clarify that his dad is a good shooter, too, even if his jump shot was two-handed coming out of middle school.

"Not as good as me," Chauncey said, confidently, "but he can shoot the ball now."

## Clemson forward Jack Clark shakes injury, adds puzzle piece for Tigers

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER  
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CLEMSON — Simple exercises shouldn't have been so daunting for Clemson senior Jack Clark, just a lunge side to side, or a seated butterfly stretch with the bottoms of his feet pressed against each other.

But every time he tried, Clark felt a painful pull in groin.

If he couldn't stretch his muscles, the 6-foot-10 forward couldn't run, jump, and box-out on a basketball court.

"It was extremely difficult mentally," said Clark, a sixth-year grad transfer, "because when I came here from (N.C.) State, I wanted to be a very high contributor, at a high level, from Day 1."

Clark showed what he can bring the Tigers in their 18th game, racking up seven points, seven rebounds, and four assists in 21 minutes at Florida State. But it was a long-delayed display of his versatility, because two groin surgeries and subsequent rehabs failed to return Clark to full health.

After subdued appearances in Clemson's first six games, Clark was sidelined for a month and a half. Pain was his new normal, until he went to lunge and butterfly stretch earlier this month — and he felt like his old self.

"I was a little shocked," Clark said. "Like, OK, I'm feeling good today. Let's try again tomorrow."

There was cautious optimism as Clark went from stretching to shooting, shooting to dunking, and then full-contact drills. He dipped his toe in the water with nine minutes of court time on Jan. 16 in a double-overtime loss to Georgia Tech, before he dove in more fully against FSU.

Some vigilance is still required, because Clark has improved and regressed before. But if the soreness in his leg muscles has truly ceased, it has returned an important puzzle piece to Clemson's lineup.

Where Syracuse transfer Joe Girard made up for some of what Clemson lost in points with Hunter Tyson's ascension to the pros, Clark's length and experience was meant to replace Tyson's physical presence on the wing.

It was a miscalculation to believe he would be ready Day 1.

"I just believe that I went out there too soon, and I just wasn't ready at that moment," Clark said. "But once I relaxed, took more time to myself, and really just waited for this to heal, I think that helped me get back out there."

It's been an oddly circular journey for Clark, because the N.C. State transfer, who spent his first four seasons at La Salle, actually suffered his groin injury during a road game at Clemson on

Dec. 30, 2022.

Late in the second half, Clark went for a steal, and he lost his footing.

"My legs just did kind of a half-split, and it was just pain that shot right through my groin," Clark said.

The native of Cheltenham, Pa., sat out all of January and half of February with the Wolfpack before he returned for the last eight games of last season.

N.C. State made the NCAA tournament, in spite of three losses to Clemson, which tied the two squads together on Selection Sunday.

"It was either us or them. That's what it felt like," Clark said. "Once we heard our name, it was kind of like a relief off of our shoulders. But it was like, 'Wow, (Clemson) didn't make it.'"

Clark, impressed by the Tigers, transferred to team up with PJ Hall, Chase Hunter, and Girard for a run at the tournament. He had surgery on his groin before he ever left for Clemson.

But, it turned out, his initial surgery cleared up one issue but not another.

"I still had a lot of pain, not only through my leg but in my hamstring area," Clark said. "That's when I told our trainer (at Clemson) it wasn't gonna go well."

Clark had another surgery in late July, but soreness continued to linger.

He'd feel good one day, practice, and then he wasn't right for another five days.

"I just couldn't put my team through that, only showing up one day a week for practice, and then you don't get me again for that whole week," Clark said.

His Clemson teammates tried to keep it light, ragging Clark as he did little but shoot free throws and watch film. Clark, exceptionally even-keeled on the surface, would just smile and laugh.

But it was frustrating.

Clemson coach Brad Brownell, who managed injuries with Hall for the better part of two seasons, will say he hasn't had a top-tier player practice as little as Clark. Even when he was cleared to play earlier this month, Brownell was cautious, not only to preserve Clark physically, but also because it wasn't certain the 6-10 forward had a firm grasp on Clemson's offense.

Brownell draws up plays during timeouts, and Clark gets it.

"But the moment he'll call something, there's a moment that goes through my head where I'm confused," Clark said, "and then it will click about a couple seconds later."

He's not all the way caught up, but Clark is on the right path.

Seeing his first shot go down at FSU, a 3-point-er, brought a smile to Clark's face.

Given the foul trouble the Tigers' front court faced in Tallahassee last week, Brownell isn't sure they beat the Seminoles without Clark.

"If we didn't have Jack Clark, it probably would have been next to impossible," Brownell said. "To have an older, experienced player, to be able to handle this environment, handle the game and the pressure of it all, was critical."

Clark has dealt with his share of issues, shaking off painful muscle pulls and launching himself into a pivotal stretch of an NCAA tournament push.

As Clemson (13-5, 3-4 ACC) heads to No. 12 Duke, Clark hopes he has returned much-needed depth to the Tigers' lineup.

A missing piece, finally returned.

“Our confidence is high, not only for me, personally, but the team, as well, knowing that our team is deep,” Clark said, “and we can pretty much play anybody on the court and there’s no letdown.”

## Clemson’s RJ Godfrey and Hunter brothers continue their fathers’ bond

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER  
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MEMPHIS — Randall Godfrey still remembers car rides back to campus with Georgia teammate Brice Hunter, just two boys from Valdosta, Ga., who spent four hours driving north and dreaming about the future.

Randall, a linebacker, and Brice, a receiver, were thinking years down the road, to when their sons would play sports for the same high school.

They didn’t necessarily imagine two Hunters, Chase and Dillon, and a Godfrey, RJ, all ending up at Clemson. And certainly not on the basketball team, even if hooping on the intramural courts was a favorite pastime of Randall, a 6-foot-2, 240-pound bruiser, and Brice, who never lacked the confidence to chuck up 3s.

Brice and Randall were inseparable, and they wanted to believe their sons would stick together, as well. Just not this way.

“We really thought they were all going to play football,” said Randall, who played a decade in the NFL with a handful of teams. “It brings tears to my eyes sometimes, because I hate (Brice is) not still here. To physically be a part of their lives, and witness what’s going on.”

It was certainly sweet for Randall to sit in the stands at the FedEx Forum in Memphis and watch his son RJ, a 6-8, 228-pound sophomore, dunk and swat shots and sweep up rebounds in the Tigers’ NCAA tournament win.

There is a wider range of emotions as Randall reflects on his late friend Brice, who was shot and killed in 2004, and his friend’s son, Chase, who just poured in 21 points on New Mexico. Chase was just 3 years old when he lost his father.

But, to think, their sons have made it this far.

To think, if Clemson didn’t have a Godfrey to come off the bench and do the dirty work inside after star center PJ Hall was strapped with foul trouble, and if there wasn’t a Hunter to drive to the rim with confidence.

Maybe the No. 6-seeded Tigers’ trip to Memphis would have been shorter, rather than a full weekend capped by a second-round game against No. seed 3 Baylor.

“This world,” RJ said, “works in mysterious ways.”

‘A strong dude’

Things seem to have come together for RJ and the Hunters, as if by design.

Even with basketball, RJ likes to say the sport chose him more than he chose it.

Randall, unsurprisingly, trained his sons to be football players, and RJ was thriving as an edge-rusher up until middle school.

Until he suffered three or four concussions in about a year and a half.

It was as much Randall’s call to transition RJ out of the sport as anyone’s, and the choice made even more sense as the boy sprouted well past his

father’s height.

Even if RJ wasn’t playing his father’s sport, Randall could help set a vision for his son. He was raised by faith-centered parents, who had Randall write down his goals. His mother, a physical education teacher, used to leave uplifting notes for Randall before she left for work each day.

Randall did these things for his children, and a little more.

He has sent them messages before games, often via text, telling them to “pray before you play.” RJ and his siblings also had magazines tossed in front of them, asked to cut out images for a vision board and write out goals beneath them.

RJ cut out a picture of the Atlanta Hawks’ De’Andre Hunter, draining a 3, and wrote down a goal of receiving a Division I basketball scholarship.

Randall had many ways of encouraging performance, even bribing his kids with money if they scored a certain number of points in a game. But the best motivator was Randall, himself, because RJ saw his father getting up at 5 a.m. to throw himself into core workouts well into his 40s.

“You realize how he made it, how he succeeded in the NFL and had a great career,” RJ said, “because he put in the work every day.”

While he was initially tall and scrawny, RJ’s work ethic — combined with his father’s genetics — sculpted an imposing athlete. He still plays like a football player on the court sometimes, punishing his fellow Tigers in practice because coach Brad Brownell doesn’t call fouls.

“He doesn’t understand his strength sometimes,” said Dillon Hunter, RJ’s roommate. “He’ll just take you out of the air, off of, like, a chest-bump. It’s just funny. We joke that he’s made of carbonite. Or he’s about to bust out of his jersey. He’s a strong dude.”

Hunter brothers

Dillon’s older brother, Chase, likes to think he is strong, too.

The Hunters hail from a house of brothers, including Jaden, a linebacker who initially played at Georgia before transferring to Western Kentucky. Their mother, Brandi Hunter-Lewis, played women’s basketball player at Georgia. Their stepfather, Ryan Lewis, coached AAU basketball.

They are competitors.

“A week ago, we had a moment where I was guarding him in the post and it got kind of physical,” Chase said of RJ. “I live for moments like that.”

Chase isn’t the loudest — unlike Brice, who helped bring Randall out of his shell — but the 6-4 guard still has shades of his father’s athleticism, his swagger.

RJ, who played AAU basketball with Dillon as a kid, admits he looked up to Chase growing up, following in his footsteps with the Atlanta Xpress.

The Godfrey and Hunter boys knew of their fathers’ bond.

They are family now. Chase sees Randall as another fatherly figure, someone who always encourages after good games and bad. Dillon sees RJ like a brother, just as psyched about RJ’s six points, five rebounds, and three blocks in the NCAA tournament as his older brother’s 20-plus points.

“We love it, man,” Dillon said. “Honestly, it’s just a testament to God. To how things can play out in life.”

Randall holds to his faith, believing Brice has been looking down on Chase and Dillon with pride. All three of Brice’s sons became Division I athletes. Two are thriving together at Clemson.

The Godfreys have flourished, as well. RJ’s older brother ran track in college. His younger brother, Grant, is a linebacker at Kentucky. Randall traveled back and forth between Memphis and Georgia this weekend, because RJ’s younger sister was competing in a county track meet.

On Friday, before the New Mexico game, Randall texted RJ words of encouragement. It was, again, “Pray before you play.”

“Just trust and believing in God’s plan,” RJ said.

Foul trouble hit the Tigers’ posts, and RJ was there, ready to do the dirty work, as Randall would on those intramural courts.

Chase was there, in attack mode, in Brice’s mold.

Many years ago, Randall and Brice dreamed of a future for their sons during those four-hour car rides from Valdosta to Athens.

Now, they are living it.

“It took a piece of my heart when we lost him,” Randall said, shifting from sadness over Brice to appreciation of their sons’ shared journey. “I’m just overjoyed when I see them out there, playing well, and contributing, helping Clemson to where they are today.”