



2024-25 CLEMSON BASKETBALL
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Brownell's policy of honesty and the portal

BY LARRY WILLIAMS, TIGER ILLUSTRATED
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CLEMSON -- Brad Brownell's head hit the pillow this morning at about 2:45.

He was back up before 6, and not by choice. "I woke up at 5:50 or something. Couldn't really sleep. And then I started getting a bunch of texts early, too. So then I started watching a little bit of the game."

A few hours later, Brownell was in the middle of his morning walk around Littlejohn Coliseum when he spoke with Tigerillustrated.com about the victory.

The scoreboard alone -- Clemson 70, No. 4 Kentucky 66 -- paints an impressive enough picture by itself.

But this goes so much deeper.

If you saw it, you know what was behind it and we don't even really need to explain it or describe it to you.

Seth Greenberg went through wars against Brownell while coaching Virginia Tech. Now he's analyzing the game for ESPN, and these words from him last night get to the heart of it:

"Brad has built a program on toughness, resilience, player development and character."

Those pillars aren't new; the "Clemson Grit" thing has been around for a while, and Clemson fans have become well acquainted with it in recent years as the Tigers' profile has elevated substantially.

And it wasn't just last year's spectacular run to the Elite Eight; they were really good before that, too.

The stirring and almost stunning thing about what we've witnessed to date this season is how quickly the Tigers have rebounded from some substantial losses. PJ Hall's name is going to be in the rafters one day. Joe Girard was an exceptional shooter. Jack Clark was a valuable piece. RJ Godfrey was no small departure.

If you're thinking deeply about how this can happen, this quickly, you can't think for long without thinking of the transfer portal.

Jaeden Zackery and Viktor Lakhin have been here for a matter of months. If you didn't know anything about Clemson basketball and were told last night that they've been here for five years you wouldn't have spent a second questioning it. Same with Myles Foster, a transfer.

If we take ourselves back to the pre-portal era, perhaps the biggest skepticism most of us had was the cultural drawbacks of frequently adding players who have not spent years being steeped in the DNA of a program.

And sure, there are plenty of examples out there of those fears being realized.

But what does this do to the locker room thing?

Here?

No.

Right here, right now it's officially laughable to say that the right type of transfer at the right time cannot be absolutely perfect for your program and the culture that underpins it.

All these new faces, and this team's collective mental and physical toughness is still strong enough to make Kentucky wilt.

On top of making Penn State wilt last week.

"Our margin is still smaller than some," Brownell told Tigerillustrated.com. "But man I love the tenacity we play with, and the way our guys are playing for each other. I do think our guys are doing that. We've gotten team buy-in. That's not easy to do all the time, no matter whether you're recruiting transfers or high-school guys. It's still managing people and parents and everybody else, too. There's a lot of voices in these kids' heads."

The elephant in the room here, of course, is Dabo Swinney's approach to the transfer portal. We believe he's more serious about it now than before, and his roster-management actions in the coming weeks should bear that out.

Basketball is different from football; Brownell became a deft navigator of the NIL and portal world in large part because he didn't have the luxury of tradition and highly regarded recruiting classes year after year. Swinney's high-school recruiting model has worked quite well until now, when the 2025 class is suffering an eye-opening number of defections.

So in a lot of ways the premises and priorities between basketball and football can be viewed as apples and oranges.

But Brownell's successful approach nonetheless imparts essential, basic lessons that most certainly should be considered enlightening to football or any other sport.

We asked him how he's perfected the art of portal speed-dating while also identifying not only the right players, but the right type of people between the ears.

His full answer was really good. So we'll just get out of the way and give him the floor:

"It's hard. There's research just in terms of phone calls you're making. There's film watching. And there's a little bit of luck, no doubt.

"And then it's a little bit of how you recruit them. You've got to recruit them the right way. In my opinion you've got to recruit them with: 'This is what it is.' I'm very honest as a recruiter. My strength and my weakness is my honesty. I'm more undersell and overdeliver rather than tell you you're going to be an All-American and you're going to average 18 points a game, 10 rebounds and do all these things. I don't know; that's just more who I am as a person. But in some ways you can say people out there are lying to kids in recruiting, and they really do. That sounds pretty harsh, but that's what it is in a lot of ways. And kids get disgruntled when you promise them something, especially a kid that's transferring.

"But when a kid is transferring and he's older, especially really older -- grad student, senior, that kind of thing -- a lot of times by that point it's playing time. It's a role. It's chance to win. It's basketball. It's not the other things. It's not academics. It's not how cool your campus is. It's not all that stuff, especially if you're recruiting the right kind of kid -- a basketball player that wants to win and wants to be good and wants to be coached and likes the way you play and the system and the style, and they've done their research on you.

"But you've got to be honest with what it is and why you're recruiting them, what you see their role being. And then it better be pretty damned close to that. Like, it better not vary much. Or you're going to have a problem when you're coaching them. And then you can have a problem with your team. That's the critical im-

portance of what it all is, is being honest with role definition and expectations and how we do things, and here are things about our program that are hard and if that's not something you're interested in you probably don't want to come here.

"And we've gotten a few kids out of the ACC, so I think with the kids in the league there's been some respect for the success of the program, how we play, and when you go against us what it's like when you look at our guys. What kind of team camaraderie do we have? You don't know all the stuff from playing against us, but you know some stuff playing against each other. I think that was appealing to some of the guys, certainly Girard and Zackery and Jack Clark. All three."

For the cultural fit to work with transfers, the burden is not just on the guys coming in. It also takes buy-in from the players he's joining.

The addition of Girard doesn't work if Chase Hunter isn't fully on board with it. Same with Zackery and Hunter.

Brownell and his staff could've gotten away with not pursuing another guard from the portal this past cycle after losing Girard. Chase's brother Dillon has already shown some major developmental gains this season from last year, and freshman Del Jones has been more than ready for the moment.

"We told Joe Girard we thought we had a team that could go to the Final Four and we needed someone to play alongside Chase Hunter. We told him: 'This is what we are selling you on because we've seen you. We know you.'

"With Jaeden Zackery, we liked the fact that he was different from Joe. That meant Chase was going to play a little different from the way he played last year. It was: 'We think you guys fit together and here's why you fit.' And then you've got to have guys on your team who want those guys to come. That's just as important, especially when you're recruiting proven, high-major players like Girard and Zackery. Chase Hunter's got to want to come in and let Joe Girard get some shots. Chase Hunter has been here a long time. That's pretty unselfish. He just wants to win.

"We knew Dillon was going to take a big step. But giving Chase an older, experienced guard was going to give Dillon some room to take that step."

Brownell has been at the transfer thing for quite a while now, dating to when Shelton Mitchell and Marquise Reed and Eli Thomas played such integral roles in the 2018 team advancing to the Round of 16.

More words from all those years of portal wisdom:

"At the end of the day, guys that have transferred once or twice and are at the end of their careers -- that's what they're looking for: The basketball better be right. It better be what you say it's going to be or it's going to be hard to manage them and you're going to have locker room trouble. ... It's hard enough to beat your opponent. There's a lot of teams that beat themselves. We really try not to do that. We really try to be rock solid, and that's our daily approach with how we do things and care about each other and role definition and accountability and appreciation for each other. I just think we do a good job in all that.

"And you don't always know with the high school guys either, even though you have done more research on them because you've been recruiting them longer. You probably have a better

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feel, but you don't always know how they're going to develop as players, how quickly they're going to learn. Some of them have trouble learning things. How competitive are they really when it gets hard? Do they kind of give in when things get challenging? Are they excuse-makers, or are they guys that stand and fight? So you're dealing with that with anybody.

"The hard part with young players is it's the first time in a lot of their lives that they're not playing as much as they want to play, and not as much as their families want them to play. So do they stay and stick it out? Or do they just leave? So that also goes back to being honest in your recruitment of them -- like, 'Hey this is what we see and it might take a year or two to get significant time.' So you can still have all that, and you don't get all the high school guys right because people can surprise you and leave. It happens.

"But there's a lot of kids in the transfer portal who are good kids. They're good players and they're good kids. They're leaving because they want something different. They want a better situation. Maybe things weren't what they were told when they were at the place they were their first time, you know? Maybe they're just looking for something different and they look at your program and see a lot of really good things."

Good things like last night.

And plenty of good things still to come.

Brad Brownell, Tigers enter new season with different identity, heightened expectations

BY GRAYSON MANN, TIGERNET
OCTOBER 28, 2024

CLEMSON - The spring brought a fast-paced race throughout the NCAA Tournament.

Brad Brownell led Clemson to its first Elite Eight berth since 1980 and gave the Tiger faithful a rush of adrenaline for two weeks the program hadn't felt in decades.

Even after their run was over, the sprint truly didn't stop.

It was back to the portal, with Brownell holding a different kind of sales pitch to retool a roster that was losing PJ Hall and Joseph Girard.

The Tigers added players from across the country, including Jaeden Zackery, Viktor Lakhin, and Christian Reeves.

With a new-look roster, and veteran players like Chase Hunter and Ian Schieffelin to lead the charge, suddenly it was back to work.

Brownell sat in Littlejohn's media room with a week to go before the Tigers' opener pleased with the team's progress, but knowing there's plenty of lessons along the way.

For someone who's become one of the longest-tenured coaches in the ACC, he learned there's a different pace to bringing this new roster up to speed.

"Just the thrill of a new group, putting the pieces together to try to make the puzzle fit," Brownell said. "I mean, as a coach, that's some of the stuff you enjoy. Very challenging. As I've said before, when you have this many new pieces, there's more than we've had in a long time, so it goes a little slower. And I've been reminded of that, and that I go to one practice thinking that we've already got this part figured out and we

don't quite have it figured out, or we got it figured out for a couple practices, then we go on to some other things, come back to it, and we're not quite where we need to be. But I have to remind myself that we have a lot of new players. And so even the terminology, and there's a lot of new terminology for everybody that it takes a lot of getting used to."

When the roster has as many new puzzle pieces as Clemson does, the reliance on the veteran leadership becomes essential.

Once, it was Hunter Tyson's team. One year later, it became Hall's team to guide. Fast forward to the present, and Hunter and Schieffelin have become the face of leadership.

At Charlotte's ACC Tipoff media event, both admitted that leadership hasn't come easy but that Hall and Tyson's examples have been good to draw from. Schieffelin has contacted Hall to help navigate this part of his career. Certainly, both feel ready for this chapter.

Brownell has shared in that sentiment, especially when things slow down, guys like Hunter haven't been "bored of the fundamentals."

"Our older guys have done a good job of that," Brownell said. "They understand it. They've come to practice excited. Chase Hunter has been great for a guy who's been here as long as he has. I mean, he could very easily get tired of this and he really hasn't shown that at all. He's been practicing really hard, and I know he's excited for games to come, just like some of the new guys. But he and Ian especially have done well."

This new look roster comes with a different identity from Clemson hoops.

Both Hunter and Schieffelin feel the excitement growing for the program and are ready to embrace it. Despite their lack of familiarity with it, Hunter feels this team is ready to show a community full of energy a new-look squad.

"Yeah, I think we've created a new identity here," Hunter said. "I think it's more on the defensive end, and we brought in some people who can help on that end. I think going to this year, I think the guys have really done a good job of buying into the culture and I think it'll show on the court."

Hamilton: Perception and expectations now different for Clemson basketball

BY SCOTT HAMILTON, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER
OCTOBER 19, 2024

CHARLOTTE — It was lunchtime on Oct. 10, the final day of the ACC Tipoff media event.

A boisterous man with a shiny, bald head came over to say a few loud words to Brad Brownell that echoed through the Hilton Charlotte Uptown's dining area. The man then departed about as quickly as he arrived, leaving Brownell to sit back down and resume his lunch.

"Who was that?" Ian Schieffelin, a senior forward for the Clemson men's basketball team, asked.

Brownell, now in his 15th year as Clemson's coach, paused from a plate of veggies and fish, and explained. It was Seth Greenberg who'd ambled over.

That's the same Seth Greenberg who was a college head coach for 22 years, twice winning ACC Coach of the Year while at Virginia Tech. The Hokies fired him in 2012, prompting him to become, fittingly enough, a talking head for ESPN. Greenberg's one of the network's main college

analysts and has spent a majority of his time with ACC-heavy coverage.

So he knows all about Clemson. And, presumably, the Tigers should know all about him.

But the 6-8 Schieffelin defied that logic.

He quickly absorbed Brownell's words and nodded before plunging a fork back into a plate of glazed salmon that had all of his attention. It was the kind of polite nod that communicated "cool" or "good to know" or perhaps even "oh, that's nice."

Otherwise, it was merely an acknowledgement to his coach for the courtesy of answering his question. And everyone resumed their meal.

But that interaction perfectly sums up life now for Brownell and the Tigers.

Different look

They're getting more attention these days, for one thing.

That's what happens when a program makes a run deep into the NCAA Tournament, as Clemson did last year. The Tigers' 24-12 season (11-9 ACC) was capped off by only the second Elite Eight appearance in school history.

"I had a some folks reach out, certainly," Brownell, Clemson's all-time wins leader, said. "But it was really more when you're out on the recruiting trail. It was 'We were pulling for you guys. We loved your team, we loved how they played. Your team was extremely fun to watch and enjoyed watching it.'"

Brownell stops again to acknowledge a couple of folks wanting a quick word as they walk past him. Always affable and accessible, he makes quick chitchat before they move on.

The steady walk-and-chats drive home the point that the perception of the program is different, even if it's foundation hasn't changed much since Brownell took over in 2010.

A steady narrative going into last season was Clemson missing out on the NCAA Tournament the previous two years. There was a belief the 2022-23 Tigers were shafted by not getting an invite. They finished tied for third in the ACC, but any claims of being shorted were negated when they lost to Morehead State in the opening round of the NIT as that event's No. 1 seed.

Still, buried beneath all of that, the reality is Clemson has the fifth-most wins in the ACC since making the Sweet 16 in 2018; that trip ending a seven-year absence dating back to Brownell's first season. The Tigers are also one of only 22 schools to go to both a Sweet 16 and an Elite Eight over the past six years.

Facing expectations

But the situation now is different. The program actually has some momentum collected from over the last two seasons, that one-game NIT flop out stricken from the equation.

Leaving this question: Is it more difficult to maintain that momentum, or was the real challenge getting to this point to begin with?

"It's going to be challenging," Brownell said. "This new world order we're kind of in certainly is different. It's now an 18-team league and it's competitive as ever, if not better than it has been the past year or two. There's been a raising of the bar in our league and we've got to try to help that."

He's right. It will be rough, even if the ACC's nightly grind has been masked by all of the foot-

ball-focused conference realignment.

Lots of veterans teams return with lots of veteran coaches, even if Tony Bennett's sudden departure from Virginia is jarring. And the uncertainty getting attention on the football side with regards to the transfer portal and NIL impact basketball more than most realize. Clemson, like any other program, is just as impacted.

The difference for the Tigers, however, is that Brownell has learned to deftly leverage the portal to fill gaps. That much was evident last year with the addition of guard Joe Girard from Syracuse, who came in to average 15.1 points and make a team-record 105 3-pointers.

He's gone now. So is P.J. Hall, arguably the greatest player in school history. Brownell has brought in four transfers in an effort to make up their production and fill some other gaps. And that's aided by guard Chase Hunter opting to return for a sixth season.

"I think it's just playing with that same chip on our shoulder that we did last year," Hunter said. "We're bringing back a lot of older guys, a lot of transfer guys that played a lot of basketball and that know how to win."

They figured that out on the go last year. Clemson was 4-6 in league play last year and on the brink of disaster before turning things around. The final result, understandably, raised lots of eyebrows.

That jibed with a typical Brownell pattern of beating expectations; Clemson has exceeded preseason polling in 11 of his 14 years as coach.

For the record, the Tigers were picked to finish fourth in this year's preseason poll.

After Elite Eight run, Clemson finds itself near the top of ACC preseason poll

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER
OCTOBER 15, 2024

CLEMSON — At the ACC Tipoff in Charlotte last week, Clemson coach Brad Brownell was asked why the Tigers always seem to outperform the conference's preseason poll.

"I guess folks don't think much of us," Brownell said. "Sometimes, the real answer is because our media situation is probably a little smaller than some in the league, and people don't know our team as well."

A run to the Elite Eight last March certainly allowed the Tigers to catch a few more eyes. The exposure seems to have had a positive — but slight — improvement in perceptions of Clemson heading into the 2024-25 season.

Clemson was voted No. 4 in this year's ACC preseason poll, which is a tick up from last year's predicted No. 5 finish.

The Tigers were slotted at No. 11 two seasons ago before they finished third and just barely missed the NCAA Tournament.

The conference's bluest of blue bloods, Duke and North Carolina, were voted No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, heading into the 2024-25 season. The Blue Devils received the most first-place votes with 42, while the Tar Heels took home 11.

Wake Forest, No. 3 in the poll, received the only other first-place vote.

Considering what the Tigers lost, though, a No. 4 ranking in the preseason poll could be seen as a sign of respect. Clemson graduated star center

PJ Hall as well as a respected ACC sniper in Joe Girard III and senior wing Jack Clark.

One of the stars of the NCAA Tournament, Chase Hunter, and the conference's most improved player, Ian Schieffelin, were both voted to the preseason All-ACC's second team.

Duke is led by the ACC's preseason rookie of the year, No. 1 overall recruit Cooper Flagg. UNC is spearheaded by the league's returning high scorer, RJ Davis, who was voted preseason player of the year.

In the end, the season will reveal what's what. Clemson added a host of transfers alongside Hunter and Schieffelin, including Cincinnati center Viktor Lakin, Boston College guard Jaeden Zackery and Duke center Christian Reeves. A junior wing, Chauncey Wiggins, is expected to take a step forward.

"I think we have better players more times than people think," Brownell said at the ACC Tipoff, "and our players bear that out with the way they play during the regular season."

Why Chase Hunter returned for sixth season on Clemson basketball team

BY DERRIAN CARTER, GREENVILLE NEWS
OCTOBER 10, 2024

Clemson basketball guard Chase Hunter revealed Thursday at ACC Tipoff in Charlotte why he returned for a sixth season.

"My dream is definitely to play in the NBA, so I wanted to try that out," said Hunter, who withdrew from the 2024 NBA Draft. "I got some feedback and had some talks with (Clemson coach Brad Brownell), and we thought the best decision for me was to come back."

Hunter tested the NBA draft waters, participating in team workouts throughout the spring. Still, he was not one of the 45 prospects invited to the NBA G League Elite Camp in May and did not receive an NBA draft combine invitation.

Hunter looks to boost his stock this season like former Clemson forward PJ Hall did when he came back for another season and signed a two-way contract with the Denver Nuggets in July. While building his profile, Hunter wants to help Clemson make its first Final Four after it fell short in the Elite Eight last season.

Hunter averaged 12.9 points on 42.4% shooting, 3.2 assists and 2.6 rebounds over 36 games in 2023-24. He made the 2024 NCAA Tournament All-West Region team, averaging 17.8 points, 5.8 assists, 4.3 rebounds and two steals over four games, after helping Clemson reach the Elite Eight for the first time in 44 years.

Hunter's return boosts Brownell's roster, which lost key contributors like Hall, Joseph Girard III, RJ Godfrey and Jack Clark. Brownell added four transfers to pair with returning players and three incoming freshmen.

Clemson coach Brad Brownell on replacing PJ Hall

Hall was Clemson's unquestioned leader last season, leading Clemson in points and blocked shots. With him in the NBA, the Tigers need Hunter and last year's ACC most improved player, Ian Schieffelin, to fill his void.

Brownell, who signed a three-year contract extension in July, said both have done a solid job so far in the offseason, but their real test will happen

when Clemson faces adversity during the season.

"Do I think these guys have the qualities necessary? I do," Brownell said. "These are two great young men who are extremely positive examples of our program. I'm proud of them, but there's going to be a lot of challenging days ahead for all of us, and I think they'll handle them."

Brownell said Hunter and Schieffelin answered the call last season with Hall when the Tigers were 4-6 in conference play and made the necessary adjustments to finish 11-9 in the ACC. This season, they will have to do it without Hall.

From prep school to JUCO to Clemson, Jaeden Zackery has proven toughness is a skill

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER
JANUARY 20, 2025

CLEMSON — Clemson guard Chase Hunter sank the dagger in Pittsburgh's heart with a stepback 3-pointer, the most replayable highlight of an overtime win.

But there were many pinpricks by his wingman, Jaeden Zackery, in the runup.

Zackery, the Boston College transfer, stuck to Pitt ball-handlers like a fly on rotting food. He buzzed around a screen at the top of the key, catching an elbow from the screener, flopping to the floor and drawing an offensive foul.

He'd sacrificed his shoulders, diving to the hardwood for a loose ball in regulation. In overtime, he stood by another scrum, taking newly collected trash and whipping it to Chauncey Wiggins for a wide-open 3.

Every point matters in the final tally, but Zackery's efforts nearly blend into the background. Coaches reach for intangibles to quantify a 6-foot-1, 218-pound guard who looks like a star from your local YMCA league.

"He's competitive, he's tough," Clemson coach Brad Brownell said. "He's got guts, man, and gets the most out of his ability."

It's arguable Zackery has been as valuable a transfer for the Tigers as Syracuse's Joe Girard III a year ago. Only they profile as evil twins.

Girard was a record-breaking scorer in Upstate New York, hitting deep 3s on the hardwood and scurrying for touchdown runs as a quarterback. He was a YouTube sensation granted immediate entry into Jim Boeheim's storied program.

Zackery, the native of Salem, Wis., was everything coaches say they want. He scrapped on baseball fields as he did basketball courts. Only Division I schools didn't flock to Westosha Central to watch Zackery steal bases and basketballs and outmuscle slimmer defenders for post buckets.

He was an undersized guard with outsized defensive prowess and an underutilized jumpshot. He was recruited heavily by Division II Concordia-St. Paul but instead trekked to Scotland, Pa., for a year of prep school.

It was an odd place to land. Scotland Campus housed prep athletics but also an international school. Zackery recalls the South Korean students from the latter, though he never talked to them. He was in the gym, pitted against four dozen athletes fighting for minutes on three different squads.

"That's kind of where I learned that you just kind of got to work for what you want," Zackery

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said.

A certain toughness had already been installed by Zackery's father, Marcus, who harped on being a "dog" on the court, more concerned with the effort required to win than how many points he could produce.

That mentality caught the eye of then-Scotland Campus coach Chris Chaney, a prep school great with 900-plus victories.

"He's just a winning guy. He checks all the boxes intangibles-wise. He's going to do whatever it takes to win," Chaney said. "In today's world, you don't have those type of guys as much."

Zackery's greatest asset was only accentuated by his roundabout journey to the ACC because he intersected with Chaney.

He's a coach who demands intensity. Effort will be spent, one way or another.

Chaney recalls one game where Scotland failed to perform on the defensive end. He offered his team a choice.

They could wake up for a 5 a.m. practice the next day. Or, since Scotland was hosting the tournament, Chaney could postpone the next game and put his team on the floor for a half-hour of closeout drills in front of puzzled spectators.

"We're going back on the court," Zackery replied.

Chaney loved that answer. He sold Zackery hard to mid-major colleges, but the COVID-19 pandemic hit and interest waned.

A player who was willing to run through a gauntlet of screens took on another challenge, Chipola College in Florida, coached by former Morehouse State and Tennessee coach Donnie Tyndall.

"He's not a guy that's going to be at the rim dunking balls," Tyndall said. "He's a good shooter. But in high school, he was a guy that was so physical and so good off the dribble that he didn't have to shoot a lot of jump shots."

Zackery was pushed to shoot outside more as well as drop a dozen pounds so he was even quicker as a defender. He became the "quarterback" of a Chipola team that finished 23-5, including a run to the semifinals of the NJCAA tourney.

The same mid-majors coaches who flirted with Zackery a year earlier called Chaney back. He wasn't sympathetic.

"What did I tell you last year at this time?" Chaney said.

"He's a winner," one of those coaches answered.

"Keep going, keep going," Chaney replied, forcing that coach to list every intangible from Chaney's year-old list.

Then, he thrust in a dagger.

"By the way," Chaney said, "you're probably not going to get him."

Zackery landed at Boston College, playing for a former Clemson assistant, Earl Grant, who didn't need much information on his first-year guard other than he was coached by Chaney and Tyndall.

Grant knew what they were about.

ACC guards would learn what Zackery was about.

"I probably had my worst game versus him in the ACC Tournament," said Chase Hunter, who was 0 of 10 from the floor in last year's loss to Boston College. "He's a pest on the ball. Very

relentless. Just doesn't stop."

Zackery went into the transfer portal seeking a better opportunity to win in his sixth and final season. Brownell wanted him because Zackery's defensive effort would free up Hunter to score.

Now, opponents' leading scorers having sub-par games against Clemson.

Memphis' PJ Haggerty and Louisville's Chucky Hepburn were a combined 4 of 20 and 1 of 10 from beyond the arc versus the Tigers. Georgia Tech's Naithan George had five turnovers last week.

Zackery has decent stats himself, pumping out 10.8 points and 3.1 assists per game and nailing 35.4-percent of his 3-point shots. But there isn't a reference in box scores to how many miles Zackery has logged over a half a season, pressing ball-handlers the entire length of the court.

"Other guys give in quickly when there's a little fatigue. Some guys have the toughness to get to the next play," Brownell said. "He's a tough kid. It's who he is. It's how he's at this level."

Brownell lists all the skills coaches tend to recruit, whether it's size, athleticism, shooting or passing.

Zackery lacked some of the essentials on that list, which is why he had to cut his teeth at Scotland and Chipola.

At every stop, he's proven to have another skill.

"Toughness is a major talent also — and, probably, a rare one," Brownell said. "Sometimes, that's as good a talent as there is."

Clemson Star Athletes Partner with Global Brand to Fight Cancer

BY MADDY HUDAK, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
FEBRUARY 6, 2025

The relationship between college sports and name, image, and likeness deals is chaotic and not regarded in the most positive light.

Among the cautionary tales, brothers Dillon and Chase Hunter on the Clemson Tigers men's basketball team commendably use NIL deals to make a difference for a cause close to home.

The star athlete duo announced an NIL partnership with Domino's Pizza to support South Carolina Oncology Associates (SCOA) Cares Foundation through a percentage of donated sales.

Dillon's and Chase's mother is a breast cancer survivor, making the campaign a personally meaningful one for the brothers.

Through this partnership, the Hunters are providing a creative and meritorious way for Clemson fans to support their college basketball team while making a difference in the local community.

The local Domino's involved is located on Old Greenville Highway at 501 Suite 4. As the press release outlines, Domino's will donate 12% of sales on men's basketball home game days to the SCOA Cares Foundation.

That 12% number was chosen specifically to honor the brothers' jersey numbers—Chase is No. 1, and Dillon is No. 2—symbolizing their impact giving back through this initiative.

Chase and Dillon both spoke about the campaign's release and the personal connection that makes their partnership special for their family.

"Partnering with Domino's on this idea means a lot to us," Chase said. "Breast cancer awareness is personal to our family, and we're grateful for the

opportunity to use our platform to support those affected by it."

"Clemson has given us so much," Dillon echoed in his sentiment. "This is a way for us to give back while engaging with the community. We hope fans will join us in supporting SCOA Cares by enjoying some pizza on game days."

The Tigers duo announced their NIL deal on Instagram with a post sharing the campaign details and highlighting their mother as a breast cancer survivor.

Through the campaign, Domino's proudly reinforces its commitment to Clemson Basketball and breast cancer awareness.

Domino's franchisee Austin Putnam spoke on the campaign as well. Putnam has previously used the Domino's location for philanthropic efforts to serve hurricane-afflicted communities after Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

"We are honored to partner with Chase and Dillon Hunter on this initiative," Putnam said. "It's incredible to see student-athletes use their platform to drive meaningful change, and we're excited to rally the Clemson community around this cause."

Cannon Gaines of ESM, a leading sports marketing agency, and the marketing director of Clemson NIL coordinated the partnership.

Fans are urged to follow the campaign on social media to stay updated on participating locations, game day promotions, and fundraising progress in Chase and Dillon Hunters' efforts.

It's a refreshing NIL deal in a market where brand value and publicity rights don't significantly influence name, image, and likeness opportunities or provide creative or meaningful avenues. The deal perfectly exemplifies how the branding aligns with the philanthropic efforts of two sons of a breast cancer survivor.

It's one that allows fans to support their team, grab a slice of pizza, and directly help a greater cause.

There are little ways for fans to support athletes outside of direct donations to NIL collectives or mandatory contributions that are being added on to season ticket sales.

There are even fewer ways to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of college athletes and those of the community. Dillon and Chase Hunter are providing a standout NIL blueprint for making a difference and generating fan support.

Hamilton: Tigers are getting Brownell's best 15 years into his run at Clemson

BY SCOTT HAMILTON, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER
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CLEMSON — Has a lopsided win over North Carolina ever felt so blah?

It sure did Monday night as No. 23 Clemson (20-5, 12-2 ACC) made short work of the Tar Heels, an almost color-by-numbers 85-65 rout that gave the Tigers a rare sweep of the four Tobacco Road schools. It completed a two-wins-in-three-days trick during which Clemson sent the ACC's traditional standard bearers back to the Triangle with some soul-searching to do.

There wasn't a gratuitous court storming this time around, either. The 8,704 folks jammed into Littlejohn Coliseum minded their manners and made orderly exits. Perhaps they flushed the go-crazy juice out of their system when they went

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bonkers Saturday after beating then-No. 2 Duke.

The harsh truth is the Tar Heels (14-11, 7-6) are mediocre by 2025 ACC standards, dreadful by historical UNC standards. Clemson did what it was supposed to do and seemed almost robotic in how it went about its business. That's the sign of a confident team trending in the right direction under confident leadership. The Tar Heels were cooked well before halftime.

UNC coach Hubert Davis is safe for another season — there's no way the school makes changes for both basketball and football within the same year. But the wine-and-cheese crowd is restless. We thought the Bill Belichick saga was intriguing; whatever transpires at UNC between now and March 2026 will be raging.

It's kind of ironic, too.

All of the things they're saying in Chapel Hill about Davis (good guy, solid coach, has hit his ceiling, etc.) anchored conversations regarding Clemson's Brad Brownell not long ago. He didn't embarrass the school, but he wasn't winning enough — or winning enough a certain way — to inspire the right folks.

Now he's about to become the dean of ACC coaches.

Notoriously consistent

Leonard Hamilton announced last week he'll be stepping down after 23 years at Florida State. That leaves Brownell, in his 15th season at Clemson, as the longest-tenured ACC coach.

Brownell entered 2023 with three NCAA Tournament appearances and a few NIT berths in the 12 years that had a postseason (COVID-19 wrecked 2020). And while Clemson has had the fifth-most ACC wins since making the Sweet 16 in 2018, most of the teams ahead of it have been national title winners or contenders.

All of that is good, though not really great. Plenty of folks were waiting for him to similarly express what Hamilton said when he stepped down, that "there comes a time when it's time" and for the school "to get someone to reenergize the program."

But, in a strange twist, Brownell is building more momentum now that at any point since he was hired in 2010.

Clemson has won five straight against top-five teams going back to 2019-20, the longest such streak in the country. Three of its four losses have come in overtime; the others were Nov. 4 at Boise State (84-71) and Jan. 7 at Louisville (74-64).

And all of this following up the second Elite Eight appearance in school history and before that a 23-11 season two years ago that should have included an NCAA trip. It's setting up to be the best three-year run of his 23-season career.

What gives?

Brownell, 56, hasn't changed his modus operandi.

He's the same coach now as he was during his nascent days at UNC-Wilmington and just a couple of years ago when so many people were ready to pull the plug. The only difference is maybe a slightly broader waistline and higher hairline — he's that notoriously consistent.

And notoriously modest.

That's what made it so jarring last May when he pointed out how much sweat equity he's had with transforming Clemson basketball and its facilities. Patting himself on the back isn't his style.

Yet, he was justified when he said "I do deserve a lot of credit for that ... a lot" because it took a 14-year journey to get things to their current level. A decade-plus of relentless fundraising doesn't happen without continuity and enough success to make people stroke checks.

Non-negotiables

The ACC is also no longer the beast that was annually sending seven or nine teams a year to the NCAA Tournament; it's certainly not as top-heavy.

It could be due to the turnover of one of the greatest coaching rosters ever assembled. The rest is simply because just about everybody everywhere is good now. Pockets of college basketball either caught up or blew completely past the ACC altogether. Still, the Tigers have kept pace.

It's also no coincidence these last three seasons coincide with that darn transfer portal really cranking up.

Brownell has been able to make it work better than most because he's not out chasing great whites. What he does and how he does it isn't everyone's flavor. But the portal has enabled him to zero in on an archetype that fits his system and culture without wasting time or resources.

Again, not much different schematically or operationally than a decade ago. Just a tool he's figured out and, until recently, been more willing to use than his football-coaching neighbor.

"Brad's stayed true to his core beliefs of non-negotiables," Seth Greenberg, a two-time ACC Coach of the Year at Virginia Tech and current ESPN analyst, said. "He never wavered on how he was going to build the Clemson program.

"And you could say the portal's a shortcut. But not a lot of guys have gotten a return on investment. They've gotten Clemson guys. They've gotten tough-minded, winning players that are all about the good of the group, that play for each other."

Indiana would be wise to make an overture to a native son for its current opening. Brownell would be equally wise to pass. He might've been reared in Indiana, but he became a fully formed coach in the Palmetto State.

Besides, his style and personality are perfect for a Clemson — places where the basketball coach pockets their ego in exchange for cooking undeterred in the shadow of football. That's the model the SEC has employed since it decided to be good at basketball, and look at how that's working out.

Brownell could operate under those conditions for the duration or at least until the five-year, \$20 million contract he signed last year expires in 2029.

If nothing else, there are worse things than having ho-hum 20-point blowouts of a blue blood program.

Here is the 'crazy' story of the Russian big man who helped Clemson conquer Tobacco Road

BY JON BLAU, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER
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CLEMSON — Viktor Lakhin's exploits against Duke and North Carolina made for a tale as tall as his 6-foot-11 frame.

But as Clemson's center stood in the bowels

of Littlejohn Coliseum on Feb. 10 and reflected on the craziest moments in his life, the pair of 22-point outbursts versus Tobacco Road royalty seemed relatively run-of-the-mill.

Just ask Lakhin about the kilometer-long swims he would take with his father and brothers in the Black Sea. The longest was three hours and 40 minutes. Not only was the water sometimes frigid, but it was filled with "soups" of jellyfish.

"Oh my God, it was horrible," Lakhin said. "When they shock you, you're all red."

Delve deeper into the basketball journey of a 1,000-point scorer, and Lakhin will talk about the 3,000 points his father expected him to accumulate before he was allowed to leave Anapa for Moscow and play for a Russian club team.

Finish his homework, plus one. Forget to take out the trash, minus one.

It took two-plus years of obedience for Lakhin to rack up 3,000.

"If I wanted to live away from family," he said, "I had to be mature enough."

He's still a "big kid," in Clemson coach Brad Brownell's mind. Lakhin came to the Tigers' facility on Halloween in a Spider-Man mask. He recently spun a prop water bottle around mid-press conference, a childlike smirk across his face as he pointed to a piece of tape that read "Don't Drink" in bold letters.

Drawing laughs isn't just an instinct for Lakhin. He has performed at open mic nights in Russia, in front of foul-mouthed bikers in leather jackets, and won them over. He owns The Comedy Bible by Judy Carter, studying it closely.

But an aspiring stand-up comedian has been challenged in serious ways. Just ask him about leaving his homeland in 2020 amid COVID-19, U.S. embassy closures and Russia's growing tensions with Ukraine.

Three times he ventured to other countries and was sent back. Once, he was stranded at a border patrol office in the middle of a Russian forest, thousands of yards from Belarus. He asked his agent if he should walk back to Moscow.

"You don't see the light at the end of the tunnel," Lakhin said. "You keep getting denied."

But here he is, "Viktor Block-hin," denying Duke and North Carolina's shots on the court. Here he is, a big kid from a foreign land who has lived a unique story.

"It's crazy," he said, "to think back on what I've done."

Putting in time

It might sound crazy to say, because Viktor Lakhin was destined to stand nearly 7 feet tall. But he was ambivalent about basketball initially.

Viktor loved soccer. He was told exactly where to catch a bus to his first hoops practice, but the bus wasn't fast enough. He waited 10 minutes. Then left.

He just tends to march to the beat of his own drum. His father, Alexander, recalls a young Viktor refusing to write anything during a Russian language lesson because he had a headache.

"Viktor did know he'd get an F for that, but he thought the teacher was too lazy to come and check his work," Alexander said. "She wasn't lazy."

Viktor was chaperoned by his brother to his second basketball practice. He made his first two free throws — ever — and a soccer fan instantly became a basketball junkie.



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Alexander fed his son's ambitions, especially during the Russian men's basketball team's run to a bronze medal in the 2012 London Olympics. On Viktor's 11th birthday, Alexander asked, "What's between you and the national team?"

Viktor provided a simple but powerful answer: "Time."

He was determined. He'd learned how to make left turn after left turn swimming with the Black Sea's currents to avoid drifting too far out from shore. He battled against the tide on his way home, which took twice as long.

He's not only treaded water for hours. Alexander sometimes had his sons walk to a nearby town, which was 42 kilometers away. Or just over 26 miles.

Viktor honed his basketball skills with a coach, Eugeny Pertsev, who invested in him "like no other." He passed his father's tests, doing dishes and his homework.

"If you do want something great, do something big," Alexander said of his 3,000-point scheme, "and countable, if possible."

Viktor made it to Moscow. Coaches would ask who dreamed of playing in the NBA, and only two scrawny "worms," as agent Dmitry Ternopol puts it, raised a hand: Lakhin and future Florida Atlantic and Michigan big man Vladislav Golden.

Lakhin, who played for CSKA-2 Moscow and the Russian youth national team, caught Ternopol's eye because of his defensive prowess. Along with basketball, Lakhin played volleyball, which honed his ability to swat away shots.

"He was always capable of shooting from the downtown," Ternopol said, not to sell his client as one-dimensional. "But he didn't really have too many (shooting) opportunities in Russia, I guess."

Lakhin never planned to play college basketball in America but wasn't enthused with his playing time in Moscow. He invited offers from overseas but only had vaguest sense of Ohio when the University of Cincinnati came calling.

"I just heard that it's armpit of America," Lakhin said with a laugh.

The journey would be quite hairy.

The Terminal

A number of factors made travel to the U.S. nearly impossible in 2020.

For starters, the Trump administration closed embassies in Russia, which routed Lakhin to Kyiv, Ukraine, in pursuit of a student visa. Only there were no direct flights to Ukraine because of growing hostilities.

His first attempt flew him from Turkey to Austria, but he wasn't permitted to fly to Ukraine. It was like a scene out of the Tom Hanks comedy "The Terminal" because Lakhin spent a full day in an airport, a couple of chocolates in his backpack, his only company the overnight cleaning crew.

He contorted his limbs around the armrests of chairs he linked into a makeshift bed.

Lakhin's second attempt was more like something out of a spy movie. He bused from Moscow to Minsk, Belarus, and flew to Kyiv. He landed in an interrogation room where lights shined in his eyes, and Ukrainians, armed with a video camera, relentlessly questioned his motives.

He was sent home a second time.

Luckily, interested parties in Cincy had connections to U.S. dignitaries who relayed Lakhin wasn't a threat. He bused overnight from Moscow to Minsk, again, but the trouble this time was riots

and COVID-19 were raging in Belarus.

No one could enter the country without a "legitimate purpose."

"Aspiring college basketball player" didn't qualify.

He was kicked off the bus to Minsk and dumped at a border office next to a gas station and many, many trees. He called Ternopol at 4 in the morning, asking "What am I supposed to do? Walk back to Moscow? Or wait for something else?"

A trucker offered to smuggle Lakhin across the border, but Ternopol found another way.

He connected with a health clinic in Belarus, which was willing to forward paperwork saying Lakhin needed to come into the country to have his "health restored," not his basketball dreams.

He walked about 2 kilometers down a highway to Belarus, his luggage rolling behind him, where he met a cab driver who would speed to Minsk to get Lakhin to his visa appointment in Kyiv.

Guards on both sides of the Russia-Belarus border laughed as he approached because they knew who he was at this point.

"They're like, 'Eh, let him go,'" said Lakhin, smiling he recalled the guards' merciful indifference.

In a few more days, he'd land in New York City. Lakhin hopped a ride to Times Square. He wanted to see where Spider-Man slung his webs in the movies.

A Clemson Man

Ternopol is amused by Lakhin's first pictures in the U.S. because he's wearing a long-sleeved shirt with blue and white stripes. Russians call this a Telnnyashka, which is worn by military personnel.

He was strutting around America, practically screaming, "I'm a true Russian."

But if you meet Lakhin today, he's liable to have sandals over Spider-Man socks. Lakhin jokes that he hails from Anapa, "Florida of Russia." He's married an actual Floridian, Jill, who played volleyball at FAU while Golden was there.

There is maybe a difference in Jill and Victor's sense of humor because Viktor believes 10 out of 10 Russians will laugh if they see a person fall off a bicycle. Jill doesn't have that same level of Schadenfreude.

Otherwise, Lakhin believes Americans and Russians are the mostly same.

"We all care about the same things," Lakhin said. "Health, wealth, family."

He came to Clemson after four years at Cincinnati — and no NCAA Tournament appearances — for unsurprising reasons.

He wanted to win.

Sometimes, Clemson coach Brad Brownell thinks Lakhin wants it too much. He can be passionate on the floor, bordering on out of control. His voice grows loud in huddles as he relays ideas on what play Clemson should run next.

"Every once and a while I have to tell him, 'Please let me coach.' Like, we're fine, relax," Brownell said. "But that's how he gets going. He cares."

Brownell smirks as he recalls his back-and-forths with Lakhin, who he jokingly nicknamed "Gladiator." The Russian's mindset tends to be glass-half-empty, and he really believed in his own perseverance at Miami despite a slight — and Brownell emphasizes, slight — fever a day before the game.

"He was comparing himself to (Michael) Jordan's 'flu game' — and I don't think there was one-tenth of what Jordan went through," Brownell said. "I was trying to make sure that he understands it's usually not as bad as he thinks it is."

Lakhin is, undoubtedly, more positive about his 3-point shot than Brownell, who bemoaned the fact that Clemson's big man scored his 1,000th career point on a 3. Brownell was afraid he'd never hear the end of it.

Then, Lakhin hit 4 of 5 from deep in a win over UNC.

"He doesn't love when I shoot it," Lakhin said. "He's gotta change his mind, probably, after today."

Cleary, Lakhin is enjoying himself. He scored 22 points on Duke and was then swarmed by a mob of orange-clad students postgame. He grabbed a water bottle and doused some of them before turning to a nearby television camera and screaming, "Clemson Grit, baby!"

The aspiring comedian made teammate Jaeden Zackery bust out laughing Monday with a quip on what it meant to beat Duke, Kentucky and UNC in the same season. Lakhin deadpanned, "We're blue bloods, too, now."

A seemingly wild statement from a native of Russia's Florida by way of Cincinnati. But the newest Clemson Man has seen crazier things.

He's delighted in this latest chapter, for the most obvious of reasons.

"I'm playing really good basketball, the best basketball of my whole college career," Lakhin said. "What makes it so good: We're winning."