



2021-22 CLEMSON BASKETBALL
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Clemson basketball forward hopes journey brings joy to Rust Belt home city

BY JOSH NEEDELMAN, CHARLESTON POST AND COURIER
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CLEMSON - No one is certain what happened to the nose mask that carries with it the story of Lorain, Ohio.

The mask, much like Lorain's manufacturing sector, is lost to time. It lasted less than one half of basketball on the face of Naz Bohannon, Lorain's favorite son, before he ripped it off and chucked it onto the bench that Saturday night in 2015.

Bohannon, the do-it-all-forward, had broken his nose the previous night diving for a loose ball, but by the time he was back in front of the home crowd - his home crowd - Bohannon decided he could do just fine without the protection.

That was the Lorain way. Bohannon, the incoming Clemson graduate transfer, was a throw-back, a gritty, blue-collar worker in an city whose people once parlayed those same traits into the American Dream.

In 1970, with the American Ship Building Company, a U.S. Steel Mill and a Ford plant in town, the population reached 78,185, per the U.S. Census Bureau.

"It was booming," Lorain High school basketball coach Matt Kielian said.

People had jobs, homes and the peace of mind that comes with the knowledge those same things would be available to their children.

Then the ship building company closed down, as did the steel mill and the Ford plant, all taking with them the soul of the community.

The story of Lorain is not unlike the rest of the Rust Belt, which in the 21st century has been ravaged by deindustrialization. Except Lorain has Bohannon, a native son whose May 26 signing with the Tigers, an ACC stalwart, wasn't just a personal high point.

It was proof a kid can grow up in Lorain and still make their dreams come true.

Growing up, Bohannon understood implicitly how his community had changed in the preceding decades. A grandfather and two of his great uncles had worked at the Ford plant and retired comfortably. But by 2005, the plant was gone, and so, too, was the next generation's safety net.

Bohannon leapt anyway. He did not need a safety net. Or a parachute. Or a nose mask. By the time he got to high school, it felt like all who had stayed in Lorain - the population dropped 18 percent between 1970-2010 - knew his name. Fans woke up with the sun to wait outside for tickets, and the lucky ones stuffed into the 2,400-person capacity gym, all packed in top of each other.

"All (the industrial jobs) went away," said John Rositano, who retired as Lorain's head coach after the 2021 season and handed the reins to Kielian. "What stayed and what didn't move away was the grit and that toughness of the Lorain people.

"When they saw a player like Naz, who I think just symbolized the toughness, the hard work, (being) willing to take a charge and dive on the floor, to break his nose and come back and play the next night, people respect it. It goes back to what they saw in their earlier days."

He could rebound. He could shoot. He could

pass. He could defend positions 1-5. Most importantly, he knew how to connect with the community. One evening before the ball was tipped, he started to repeatedly clap, and soon the whole building was clapping along with him, creating a wave of natural sound. A tradition was born.

"It was almost like he was a rap star," Kielian said. "And our games sometimes were like concerts."

It was during after-school shifts at the local Boys & Girls Club that Bohannon realized the power of his journey. He told his father, Norman, that most kids he met never saw themselves leaving Lorain.

Bohannon proved that was possible when he went to Youngstown State and became a four-year starter. As a senior in 2020-21, Bohannon led the Penguins in scoring (16.5 points per game) and rebounding (8.2 points per game), but he wanted more.

Then Brad Brownell called.

If Bohannon came to Clemson, Brownell told him, the coach couldn't guarantee minutes or a specific role. But there was a caveat.

"If you work as hard as everyone says you do," Brownell said, "anything's possible."

Bohannon will join a Clemson team in transition. The Tigers next season will be without forward Aamir Simms and guard Clyde Trapp, the two veteran leaders who just led the Tigers to their second NCAA Tournament berth in five seasons.

Bohannon is excited to help the team form a new identity, but he's also mindful of the indirect consequences of his success.

In late May, during a moment of rest from packing up his Youngstown apartment, Bohannon and his father Norman plopped down in a couple of folding chairs. The apartment was nearly empty, and as they reflected on Bohannon's journey, Norman reiterated how proud he was.

Bohannon offered a bigger perspective.

"Dad, it's bigger than me," Bohannon said.

"This is for everyone at home. They can all experience it through my eyes.

"Hopefully that can inspire them."

Canton's Foster Has Earned His Stripes at Clemson

BY JOSH PERRY, HOCKOMOCKSPORTS.COM
OCTOBER 10, 2021

During his senior season, Devin Foster sat down with head coach Ryan Gordy to discuss his collegiate options. Canton's all-time leading scorer (1,306 points), the 2019 Hockomock League MVP and HockomockSports.com Player of the Year, and the 2019 Red Auerbach Massachusetts "Mr. Basketball", Foster had plenty of local options, but he wanted to play at the highest level. "He said I think I can play at the highest level coach and I'm going to bet on myself and I'm going to go for it," Gordy recalled. "You never want to hold a kid back from his dream."

Rather than staying close to home, even if it meant passing up instant playing time or being the star of a team, Foster chose Clemson. He chose the ACC. After two years as a team manager, Foster's bet on himself has paid off. Last month, he became an official member of the Tigers, wearing the orange No. 14.

"I was kind of hoping for it," Foster said, "But,

you know, coming out of high school, I was from a public school and I kind of wanted to stay home and play it safe [in high school], so I knew for college I wanted to do something a little different. I knew I was going to be willing to be around basketball in whatever capacity that was."

He continued, "I'm more excited than anything. Last year was just a lot of hours behind the scenes, doing the little things, and now I get to be in the spotlight a little bit more. I'm just looking forward to it."

When Clemson opens the season with an exhibition against Georgia Southwestern State on Nov. 1, it will be Foster's first chance to run out in front of a packed crowd at Littlejohn Coliseum as a player.

"It will definitely be surreal," Foster said with a chuckle. "I feel like I've got a long way up until that point, I mean we just started full practice. I know how long it's going to take to get there, so I'm just taking it day-by-day at this point."

Gordy used the same word to describe his former player on an ACC roster. "When you talk about ACC, it's pretty surreal," he said. "That's as big as it gets.

"I think what I'm proud of is the path that he took to get there. When got there, he put the work in and did everything the right way and won over the coaching staff. To be awarded a spot on that roster is a testament to who he is, the sort of personality that he has, the hard work, and what a great representation for our community in Canton."

Unlike former King Philip star Jake Layman, who went to Maryland and is now playing in the NBA for the Minnesota Timberwolves, Foster wasn't a national recruit with a high profile in the ACC. He came to Clemson knowing that he would have to walk-on or be a team manager to be part of the program.

Although his first-semester schedule didn't allow him to take part in the basketball program, when he returned in January for the second semester he was able to join as a manager. The pandemic made that a short experience, as the campus closed just two months later, but it was a taste of what Foster had missed without basketball in his life.

"I just missed basketball, missed being around the sport and obviously they have a great group of guys," he said. "I was still working out on my own, maybe not basketball-wise but lifting, just trying to stay in shape, it was just what I was used to, I kind of didn't know anything else. But once the opportunity opened up to be a part of the program, I kind of hopped right on it and ran with it."

Last year, Foster was a full-time manager. He got to practice a little, running drills at first before moving up to the scout team, running the opponent's sets. It started with defense, which allowed Foster to get his feet under him and acclimate himself to the coaches' expectations.

"When I did get the chance to bring the ball up or give them a look on offense, it made it a little easier because I'd been on the court before," Foster explained. "I felt like I'd shown them what I could do a little bit."

Being a team manager isn't a direct route to being a full member of the team. Foster said that wasn't his goal when he signed on to help the program. He wanted the structure, the friendships

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that he developed with his new teammates, and gave him that niche that every new college student is looking for. His transition from manager to player will be helped by the relationships he has already built with his teammates.

"When I first joined, they were really welcoming," he said. They're a great group of guys. Now that I'm on the team, they're really excited for me, just giving me support and encouragement. They embraced me for sure."

There has also been plenty of support from his hometown. Former coaches, teachers, and staff have shared their excitement at the news on social media and it hasn't gone unnoticed.

"I love the town of Canton," Foster said. "They've always been in my corner supporting me. It's humbling though because I know the amount of work I put into basketball, the time I've spent in the gym. I'm definitely honored and extremely grateful for all the support they've given me and the encouragement even when I was a manager."

Gordy noted, "He embodied what Canton wants to be and he was sort of a poster child for everything that we believe in — having a high character, setting your standards high, overcoming adversity, and being a great teammate. He really is a champion of excellence but not just on the court but in the way that he carries himself." Gordy also knew exactly when Clemson would be paying a visit to Conte Forum to face Boston College (Feb. 26) and said there should be a cheering section of Foster's former coaches in attendance.

That game is still a long way away and Foster will have plenty of new experiences over the coming months. There will be running out in front of the home crowd as a player for the first time or the first road trip to experience warming up in front of rabid ACC crowds. Maybe there could even be his first appearance as a Tiger.

"I'm really excited for what's coming in the next few months," he said, although he wouldn't be pulled into discussions of playing time. "I just kind of go out there and give the scholarship guys the best look I can. I realize it's not about me, it's about the other guys. I'm not really thinking of myself when I'm out there, I'm thinking about getting those guys better."

When he left Canton, Foster wanted the chance to prove himself at the top level. He is there now, although he admits it is hard to put it into perspective right now.

"I didn't know if my career would continue but luckily I got an opportunity and I'm very grateful," Foster said. "Right now, in the moment, I can't see the bigger picture yet because I'm in it but it's definitely surreal and it's really exciting for me."

Clemson, Brownell look to keep ACC momentum growing

BY PETE IACOBELLI, AP
OCTOBER 21, 2021

Clemson's Brad Brownell acknowledged the water took a lot longer to boil on his men's basketball program than he would've liked. These days, Brownell believes the Tigers have a rising basketball brand that stands strong in the powerhouse Atlantic Coast Conference. Brownell enters his 12th season at Clemson off the team's second NCAA Tournament appearance in the past four seasons. The Tigers went 16-8 and 10-6 in the

ACC, the fourth time Brownell's program has won double-digit conference games.

The Tigers had only accomplished that three other times in their first 56 seasons in the league.

"The first five years that I was on the job, it was hard," Brownell said. "Two of those years, we didn't have an arena. That's never easy for players in your program." Since its venue renovation that was completed prior to the 2016-17 season, Brownell believes his team had steadily moved forward.

"I think we've done a good job over the last decade of building our brand and improving our program in all areas," he said.

The Tigers will need to call their depth heading into this season without its leading scorer and rebounder from last season in Amir Simms, a second-team all-ACC player last year who won the Skip Prosser Award given the league's top scholar athlete. Also gone are guards Clyde Trapp and John Newman III, who combined for 32 starts last season.

Brownell said he'll lean heavily on a pair of experienced transfer players new to Clemson in Naz Bohananon of Youngstown State and David Collins of USF. Bohananon is 6-foot-6, 228 pounds who led Youngstown with 16.5 points and 8.2 rebounds a game.

Collins, at 6-4, was USF's leading scorer last season at 12.5 points a game. He also led the Bulls in assists. When Bohannon researched Clemson, he found the program he wanted.

"I could respect the culture that (Brownell) has in place and the staples the program stood for," he said.

BACKCOURT CHANGES

Trapp and Newman have been significant parts of Clemson's backcourt the past few seasons. Their departures, Brownell said, means juniors Al-Amir Dawes and Nick Honor will have to play even bigger roles than they have. Dawes started 15 games last season, averaging 9 points a game. Honor made 10 starts and finished with 8.1 points a game.

HALL'S TIME

P.J. Hall was the top-rated high school player in the state of South Carolina when he joined the Tigers last season. With Simms gone, Brownell said the 6-10 sophomore will play center full time after coming off the bench last season. Hall's biggest moment last year was a hook shot with 10 seconds left in overtime to secure Clemson's 74-70 win over North Carolina State last year.

ADDING STAFF

Brownell added longtime college basketball coach Jeff Reynolds to his staff as a special assistant to the head coach. The two had known each other for some time and Brownell wanted to tap into Reynolds knowledge of the region and the ACC. Reynolds was head coach at Air Force and Wingate. He also served as director of scouting and game management at Virginia Tech.

SCHEDULE

Clemson opens at home against Presbyterian on Nov. 9. It plays in the Charleston Classic against Temple and also features Marquette, Mississippi and West Virginia. The Tigers go to Rutgers in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge. The ACC season starts

Dec. 4 against Miami, one of three league games Clemson plays before New Year's Day.

Brownell Credits Building of Clemson Brand for Ability to Land Impact Transfers

BY JP PRIESTER, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
OCTOBER 25, 2021

Brad Brownell has been very proactive when it comes to using the transfer portal to plug holes on his roster.

Former players Shelton Mitchell, Marquise Reed and Elijah Thomas are all examples of guys Brownell brought in as transfers and were all three key contributors for the head coach, which included a run to the Sweet 16 during the 2017-18 season.

This offseason has been no different as the Clemson head coach once again turned to the portal, signing David Collins, a grad transfer from USF and Naz Bohannon, another graduate transfer out of Youngstown State.

Collins is a 6-foot-4, 220-pound guard who led the Bulls in scoring last season, with 12.5 points per game and averaged over 30 minutes per contest. Bohannon is a 6-foot-6, 228-pound forward who led the Penguins in scoring last season (16.5 ppg) and rebounding (8.2 rpg), while also logging 32.9 minutes per contest and a team-best 52.6 percent shooting clip. He is one of just 22 players dating back to the 1992-93 season to post at least 1,200 points, 975 rebounds and 275 assists in a career.

Brownell credits some of the improvements in the facilities that have helped the Tigers build the type of brand that attracts players like Collins and Bohannon, guys who are looking to finish their careers on a high note.

"Yeah, I think we've done a good job over the last decade of building our brand and improving our program in all areas," Brownell said at the ACC Tipoff in Charlotte. "The facility improvements that we did five years ago have really started to pay off."

Brownell said that the school has shown that it wants to be successful in basketball, noting that the upgrades to the facilities at Littlejohn are now starting to pay dividends.

"I think it shows that Clemson wants to be good in basketball," Brownell said. "The first five years I was on the job it was hard. Two of those years we didn't have an arena. That's never easy for players in your program. We played a year up in Greenville. There was a lot that went into it, and I think we've worked really hard to build our program, build our brand, develop a culture where kids are having good experiences."

Brownell is entering his 12th season as the Tigers' head coach and the program has made it into the NCAA Tournament in two of the past four seasons. However, expectations are not quite as high this season, with the media picking Clemson to finish 11th in the ACC and with FanDuel listing their odds of winning the national title at +15000.

With the team now starting to have some success, though, and graduating its players, along with the stability Brownell has provided the program with, the school is now in a much better position to land some of the transfers capable of coming in and making an immediate impact.



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"We're being productive, we're winning games, we're graduating players. And when you bring in guys like Naz or David Collins on a visit and they get to see what Clemson has to offer, I think it's impressive. They've seen success on the court, Sweet 16 and NCAA Tournament teams, they see guys graduating, they see a good place to go to school and get a grad degree like Naz is going to get. Then I think they come around and meet your players and they see you have good guys in the program. So there's stability, there's a culture of success and work, and hopefully guys like Naz and David, that was a big part of why they chose Clemson.

Clemson, Brownell Face Tall Task of Replacing Aamir Simms in 2021-22

BY BRAD SENKIW, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
OCTOBER 26, 2021

Aamir Simms personified Clemson basketball for multiple seasons.

From scoring to rebounding to being the face of the program, Simms did everything for the Tigers, who made the NCAA tournament last year in large part to Simms' presence.

Heading into the 2021-2020 season opener on Nov. 9, the fan favorite, ambassador and leader of the Tiger team that won the gold medal at the 2019 World University Games opted not to return to Clemson earlier this year.

"Aamir was a significant loss," Clemson head coach Brad Brownell said. "Terrific player who had an unbelievable career at Clemson. As much as the points and rebounds, it was his personality. It was the way he approached practice every day, his work ethic, his smile, his personality. It just rubbed off on everyone. We're going to miss a lot about him."

Brownell acknowledges that there isn't an easy way to replace what Simms gave the program, but the Tigers still have to make up for his production. Simms averaged a team-high 13.4 points per game and 6.4 rebounds per contest. He scored 1,122 points, hit 110 3-pointers, grabbed 636 rebounds and dished out 198 assists in his four-year career.

"Obviously there's not one player that you're going to go recruit or sign that's going to be like him, but I do think we have brought in some guys like Naz (Bohannon) here and David Collins that are experienced and older players," Brownell said. "We've got a player like Hunter Tyson who's been in our program for four years and understands our culture and what's important to Clemson to win and be successful. I think that in terms of the productivity, it'll be a bunch of different guys."

Bohannon and Collins are transfer-portal pickups who bring past production. Bohannon averaged 16.5 points and 8.2 rebounds for Youngstown State a year ago while Collins contributed 12.5 points, 3.5 rebounds and 3.4 assists per contest at USF last season.

And then there's Tyson, who emerged as a more reliable offensive weapon for the Tigers in 2020-21. He gave Clemson 7.5 points per game and shot 43.1 percent from behind the arc as a sophomore.

Brownell mentioned sophomore center P.J. Hall as another player who will help fill up a stat sheet left behind by Simms. And while production is important, replacing other areas Simms gave

the Tigers in the locker room and on the court could prove more difficult this year, but Brownell believes the influence can carry over.

"I think the attitude, the personality part is just going out and getting good guys, and we've done that," Brownell said. "We've gotten guys that like each other, that are respectful of the older players. We have a good morale. We have a good feeling in our program and team, and some of that's because of the guys like Aamir Simms."

Brownell Expecting Big Things From Tigers Backcourt

BY ZACH LENTZ, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
OCTOBER 27, 2021

At least at the beginning of the season, the backcourt might have to provide a big percentage of the offense. The Clemson Tigers return two of its top three scorers and three of the top six, and all are backcourt players.

However, there is one key piece that is not returning to the Tigers in the 2021-22 season, veteran guard Clyde Trapp. But even with that loss, head coach Brad Brownell is still extremely confident that his Tiger—who currently hold +4000 odds to win the ACC Championship according to FanDuel—will not miss a beat.

"Yeah, Clyde was a good player. He had a very nice senior year and was getting better and better," Brownell said. "Obviously had a major injury his junior year that he had to play with, torn ACL, but we do have experienced guards."

Al-Amir Dawes is the top returning scorer from last year off of his 9.0 points per game scoring average. He shot a much improved 39.4 percent from beyond the arc and added a 74.2 free throw percentage. He had a positive assist to turnover ratio in averaging 25.5 minutes per game.

Nick Honor started 10 of the 24 games, but averaged 23 minutes per game. He made the clutch shot of the season at the buzzer in a 74-72 win over Georgia Tech in February. He was third on the team in scoring last year with an 8.1 average and led the team in steals with 32. His 53-24 assist to turnover ratio was the best on the team and his one turnover for every 23.3 minutes was among the best for guards in the ACC.

"Nick Honor and Al-Amir Dawes have both made big shots for us, they both hit game-winning shots. They both have been starters," Brownell continued. "They both have played a lot of minutes. We played them together some last year. We may start them this year, I don't know, we'll see. Alex Hemenway is an experienced guy that started a few games and can really shoot the ball. Our experience lies in our backcourt in terms of guys that played."

"Certainly Clyde is different because he was a bigger wing that really rebounded the ball defensively and took care of the ball, was a really good passer. We tried to address some of that with David Collins, a grad transfer from South Florida who's 6'4" and 215 and a big strong wing, so we felt like he would help us a little bit in that area. Again, we had a really good year last year. Went to the tournament, and a lot of it was because of the Aamir Simms and Clyde and Jonathan Baehre, our three seniors. Those three guys are going to be missed, but that opens up opportunities for other guys, and we're hopeful that those guys are ready to take a big step."

Five things to know about Clemson men's basketball ahead of the 2021-22 season

BY ALEXIS CUBIT, THE STATE
NOVEMBER 1, 2021

Clemson's men's basketball team lost a good portion of experience and production with the graduation of Aamir Simms, Clyde Trapp and Jonathan Baehre. Simms and Trapp were two of the Tigers' top five leading scorers, while Baehre provided height in the post. The Tigers are much younger than they were at this time last year with plenty of new pieces, but head coach Brad Brownell calls the opportunity to put together a new team exciting.

Here are five things to know about the 2021-22 Clemson men's basketball team:

STARTING LINEUP IS TBA

With the regular season a week away, Brownell is still exploring a starting lineup. No spots have been assigned as of yet with the Tigers still figuring out who plays well together. Heading into the season, there might be times where guards Al-Amir Dawes and Nick Honor start together. Dawes had 15 starts last season, averaging 25.5 minutes per game, while Honor appeared in the starting lineup 10 times and played 23.3 minutes per outing. "That's one of the challenges early on is, you're trying to figure out who plays the best with whom and when you're constantly playing against each other, it's not quite as good in terms of figuring out with other opponents," Brownell said. "You don't get quite as many possessions to check on some things that you'd like. I think we've got a lot of different ways we can go."

HONOR AND DAWES SPELL TEAM SPIRIT

With Simms' departure, Brownell believes Clemson's team spirit will be in the hands of Honor and Dawes. As two of the more experienced returning players, the Tigers will need them to set the tone for the rest of the team. "What I mean by that, a little bit in basketball, your guards, the ball is always in their hands when you're starting every possession and then they're guarding it to start every defensive possession," Brownell explained. "We need those two guys to be extremely active defensively and aggressive defensively to set the tone initially for our defense. If those guys do a good job in that area, I think it really helps the other guys with how we want to play defensively."

OLDER, BUT NEWCOMERS

During the offseason, Clemson picked up graduate transfers Naz Bohannon and David Collins from the transfer portal. "David Collins and Naz Bohannon are two older players that give us experience and strength and some physicality that we probably need with the loss of Aamir and Clyde and Jonathan Baehre," Brownell said. Bohannon, a 6-foot-6, 232-pound forward, comes to Clemson after averaging team highs in points (16.5) and rebounds (8.2), and shooting 52.6% from the field at Youngstown State. He's also one of only 22 people since the 1992-93 season to reach 1,200 points, 975 rebounds and 275 assists in a career. Collins, a 6-foot-4½ guard from the University of South Florida, led the Bulls in scoring with 12.5 points a game, leaving the



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program with 1,516 career points, seventh-most in program history, to go along with 96 total starts in 116 games played.

INCOMING CLASS TO WATCH

Brownell also touts a freshman class that includes forwards Ian Schieffelin and Ben Middlebrooks. Schieffelin (6-7, 225), a three-star recruit from Georgia, played for Grayson High School, ranked No. 1 in public schools, and averaged 12 points, 12 rebounds and 3 blocks per game as a senior. Middlebrooks, a 6-10, 232-pound four star prospect from Florida, chose Clemson over Florida, Auburn, Georgia, Ole Miss, Virginia Tech, Notre Dame and Dayton, and recorded 20.5 points and 13.6 rebounds an outing in his final prep campaign. "(Schieffelin and Middlebrooks) give us some depth inside and some size that we certainly need around the basket and in the front court," Brownell said, adding "Josh Beadle in the backcourt is a kind of exciting guard, a guy with good speed and kind of a herky-jerky game that will add depth to the perimeter." Beadle, a 6-3, 180-pound combo guard, was a three-star prospect and scored over 1,000 points in his high school career.

ADDRESSING SIZE

Clemson only has two players taller than 6-foot-8 on their roster, which could present size issues in the ACC going against teams like Duke, which has two seven-footers, and Florida State, which has four players listed at 7-0 or taller. While they can't combat the height, the Tigers hope to use physicality to compensate. "There are some times that we're going to be a little smaller," Brownell said. "But, hopefully, we're going to be able to competitively fight down there to compete. ... That's going to be a challenge for sure in certain situations." The Tigers (16-8) finished fifth in the ACC last season with a 10-6 record and open the season by hosting Presbyterian College on Nov. 9.

Playing through pain: Not even an injury can stop Clemson's surging sophomore PJ Hall

BY ALEXIS CUBIT, THE STATE FEBRUARY 4, 2022

Either adrenaline, dedication or a combination of both caused PJ Hall to dive for a loose ball and go crashing into the courtside chairs during Clemson's game against Florida State on Wednesday night. As he got up, Tigers fans applauded in relief that the sophomore was OK. Less than a minute later, Hall was at the free throw line and made one to put the Tigers up 65-58 with 8:47 remaining in regulation. Hall, who missed the final nine minutes of the first half with foul trouble, ended the game with a game-high 15 points to go along with seven rebounds, a block and a steal in 27 minutes played. He's been lauded for his year-over-year improvement, drawing high praise from legendary Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski.

"Hall is the most improved player on the planet, right? He played nine minutes a game last year," the Blue Devils' longtime coach said after the Clemson-Duke contest on Jan. 25. "He's one of the better big guys in the country. He's a pro, really, because he can shoot, go out, (be) mobile."

After averaging 3.5 points and 2.0 rebounds in nearly 10 minutes per contest as a freshman, the Spartanburg native leads Clemson in scoring with 14.8 points per outing and blocks (22 total) along with being the team's second-leading rebounder (6.1) in 28.5 minutes per game this year.

And, he's done it all with a bad foot. About six games into the season, Hall began experiencing inflammation between the fourth and fifth metatarsals — the bones that connect the ankle and toes — of his left foot. The injury was at its worst around the time Clemson played Drake on Dec. 11, he said. Ironically, Hall recorded season highs of 22 points and 13 rebounds in around 38 minutes of play as the Tigers won 90-80 in overtime.

"Once I get on the court, I've got so much adrenaline going through my body I don't really feel it in the first half," Hall said. "Halftime, you cool down a little bit and you feel it but try not to think about it. ... It's not as bad as it may seem, but play through it whenever it hurts bad. If it gets too bad, then rest a little bit the next day but in the game just try not to think about it."

It certainly wasn't on his mind when he threw down two dunks in the first five minutes of the second half against the Seminoles. There's no way to come down from the rim gingerly, as evidenced by the scream Hall let out after the second jam that gave the Tigers a 53-43 lead. Clemson (12-9, 4-6 ACC) went on to win 75-69.

Playing through the pain is something he does for fans and his teammates, he explained.

"Whenever people come to games, I know that someone's out there coming to watch me, so I go out there and I give my best, give my all because I don't want someone to get back home disappointed," he said. "Also, I'm playing for the guy beside me. All these guys, we all have our nooks and crannies that are hurt and cracks in our armor, but we're fighting for each other and playing for each other."

Hunter Tyson, in particular, is someone Hall said inspires him to play through the pain. Tyson played with "two purple ankles" for a stretch during the season.

The relationship between Tyson and Hall extends even further back than that as the two worked out together during the offseason. If there's one person who can attest to how much Hall has grown as a player, it's the older Tyson, who Tigers head coach Brad Brownell called the leader of the team.

"I've just seen how his confidence has grown ever since last year," Tyson said of his teammate. "This offseason, me and him spent a lot of time in the gym, a lot of time in the weight room just working hard, trying to get better every day. I think it's showing. He's done a great job really answering that call when we need to throw it to him in the post. He's aggressive and he's confident with the ball. I'm just really happy for him and the season he's having."

Hall had to step up even more when Tyson left Wednesday's game with what was ultimately ruled a broken clavicle that will keep him out indefinitely. Hall, as a result, scored 11 of his 15 in the final 20 minutes, which included three free throws in the final two minutes to keep Florida State at bay.

At this point, Hall's injury isn't serious enough to require surgery so the most he can do is physical therapy. The pain level ebbs and flows throughout the season — the Boston College

game was another where Hall had a bad flareup — but he keeps going.

Brownell limits his young forward in practice as much as he can. Instead of doing live work, Hall will do either shooting or passing drills and work on the air bike. The level of conditioning is sometimes more rigorous than actually practicing.

"I would much rather be practicing than the stuff I do on the sidelines," Hall said.

Conditioning can't replace game reps, though. Brownell tries to keep that in mind when Hall goes into games. Hall doesn't use it as an excuse, though, but pushes through as he continues to elevate his game and put up stellar, adrenaline-powered performances.

"I have to remember as a coach that, hey, he's not practicing every day," Brownell said. "He might get 30 minutes or something like that before a game and that's about it. It's not easy on him, but when you're the best player on a team or the No. 1 option, that's some of the things you have to deal with."

Why Clemson big man PJ Hall is 'most improved player on the planet'

BY JON BLAU, POST AND COURIER FEBRUARY 4, 2022

CLEMSON — As P.J. Hall lined up to shoot free throws with a slim lead over Florida State, the crowd at Littlejohn Coliseum practiced standard etiquette. They grew so, so quiet.

When a player from the home team needs to focus on burying a freebie, it's time to eliminate all distractions. Be still. Stay silent. Do not disturb.

Only that isn't how Hall is wired. The 6-foot-10 sophomore sank the first free throw, making it 70-67, Clemson, with under two minutes left. But a hushed gym felt too hollow. The silence was draining his fuel.

So the Tigers' emerging star did what no other player in college basketball would do. Before he shot his second free throw, Hall stretched out his long arms and flapped his hands upward.

He encouraged the fans in Littlejohn to get loud. He wanted to hear them.

"Whenever I start getting the crowd into it, I'm not tired, I don't feel any pain I've been going through," Hall said. "It's an adrenaline pump."

This was a new one for Clemson coach Brad Brownell, who quipped after the game that he was going to talk with his happy-go-lucky big man. Thomas Ryan, Hall's high school coach at Dorman, was in the stands at Clemson and worried his expressive protégé may have gone a bit too far.

"He's going to miss this one," Ryan thought to himself.

But he didn't. Hall knocked it down, and the crowd nearly blew the roof off.

Upping the ante on a free throw is risky. It's definitely unconventional. But Ryan understands its purpose. This is part of the reason Hall has gone from an unconfident, unsure freshman to one of the most improved players in the country as a sophomore. He's not only confident. He's almost unchained.

Not long after he sank those clutch free throws, Hall blocked a shot on the defensive end and started wildly pumping his fist while the ball was still inbound.

"It's his sheer emotion coming out. As a coach, you never want to take that from him,"



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Ryan said. “There are times you wish he’d pull it back a little bit. But that’s what makes him special. That’s what makes him tick. And, ultimately, that’s going to make his teammates come alongside and that’s how he’s going to win games.”

It took some time for one of the top 50 recruits in the nation to find his mojo in a Clemson uniform. But now Hall is at full throttle. Jacking 3s like a guard. Diving for loose balls like a walk-on. Hammering dunks like a grown man.

A little over a week ago, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski deemed Hall the “most improved player on the planet.” That may seem like hyperbole, but the sophomore is averaging 14.8 points and 6.1 rebounds in 28.5 minutes per outing, an astronomical leap from Hall’s 3.5-point, 2-board line in just under 10 minutes a game as a freshman.

He’s a different player. But really, Hall has just rediscovered himself.

The pieces were all there. His height and athleticism come from his parents, Jerome, formerly a 6-6 forward at Wofford, and Melanie, a 6-2 basketball and volleyball athlete at the College of Charleston. But relentlessness is also a common trait amongst their children.

That mentality made P.J. and Thayer stars in basketball and volleyball, respectively. But the oldest, Chris, set the example. He tried out for Dorman’s varsity basketball team four times. He didn’t make it the first three times.

“The two younger ones saw his passion to get better, to prove to everybody it can be done,” Jerome said. “You just have to put the work in.”

It helped Chris grew half a foot before his senior year, reaching 6-7. But Chris can still remember sitting in Coach Ryan’s office after tryouts senior year. Dorman planned to keep 15 players that year. He was No. 16.

“But I haven’t seen a player with as much hustle,” Ryan acknowledged. He was willing to bump Chris up to varsity. With conditions.

“What followed was my job description,” Chris said. “Glorified water boy.”

Chris was still unpolished. What set him apart, though, was his willingness to dive for loose balls, to pick teammates up, to grab someone a bottle of water when they approached the bench. Ryan wanted that all the time. All season.

“Senior year, he played a few minutes, because he dove on the floor for loose balls, he was relentless,” Ryan said. “If you asked all of his teammates who played the hardest, it would always be Chris. P.J. watched that, and in the back of his mind, he never forgot his brother, diving on the floor.”

They are about a decade apart in age, but a competitive fire is a through-line from one brother to the next. Chris transformed from a scrawny, rarely used forward at Dorman to a rocked-up, 240-pound contributor at Division II Anderson. Thayer became a 6-3 outside hitter for Florida’s volleyball team.

P.J. was taller, more skilled, and just as relentless as his brother. He was also a light-hearted spirit, a jokester who can quote *The Office* with ease. But his greatest gift has always been his ability to flip a switch.

“On the floor, it’s an assassin mentality. Every ball is mine. If I’m open, I’m pulling a 3. Under pressure, getting the crowd hyped before he knocks down free throws,” Chris said. “That’s the player I want him to be, and that’s the foundation

of the player he is.”

That confidence could make P.J. interesting to coach. Ryan entered a sideline huddle fired up, upset about rebounding, and P.J. interjected, “Coach, calm down. Smile. We got this.” Ryan never worried about Hall’s ability to flip a switch after some witty banter, but he did have to keep tabs on others who weren’t as gifted at snapping into focus.

Hall enjoyed the show, the interplay with Dorman fans during games. But he also wanted to be the best version of himself for everyone in the stands, spending late nights in the gym putting up shots. He would shoot so late into the night, Ryan had to set a curfew with the security guard who patrolled Dorman’s halls at night.

“Once it gets to midnight, you’ve gotta tell him to go home,” Ryan told the guard.

For three years at Dorman, Hall wasn’t just a varsity contributor. He was usually the best player on the floor. He was South Carolina’s Gatorade Player of the Year in 2020. He was the state’s No. 1 recruit.

But as a lot of freshmen do, Hall struggled in his transition to college. Ryan noticed about a half-dozen games into the season, his showman looked lost. He wasn’t the best player on the floor, or even at his position. Clemson leaned on its veteran big man, Aamir Simms, and just let Hall spell him.

“He had a couple of bad games, and the coaches were really hard on him, and he struggled to find his identity,” Ryan said. “When that confidence went down, he didn’t play well.”

To say Hall was content in a lesser role wouldn’t be true. Ryan had to tell him to “trust the process” on occasion. But it seemed more like a when, not an if, Hall would reach another level. Chris didn’t quit when coach Ryan sent him back to his church league three years in a row. P.J. wasn’t going to settle, either.

That meant P.J. capped his visits home at 5:30 a.m. in the summer months, returning to Clemson for intense leg workouts with strength coach Justin McClelland. They needed to put some strength in Hall’s legs, and “prowler pushes” — sleds with poles to stack 45-pound plates, pushed up and down the floor — were a method of choice.

“A lot of times, your legs are numb, you finish the workout and you just sit down, lay down,” Hall said. “Not fun, but it gets you where you need to be.”

In the offseason, Hall was able to reduce his body fat percentage from 13 percent to closer to 7. He was in the gym, constantly, putting up shots. The approach Hall took as Simms’ understudy — just focusing, one day at a time — started to pay dividends.

“There were times last year I was really struggling mentally. You come out of high school, you’re a top-50 player, and you’re expecting to come in and contribute,” Hall said. “I knew I wasn’t going to be ‘the man,’ but I wanted to contribute more on the court. I had to learn how to do that in other ways. Being on the bench, and being on the sideline more, I had to learn how to keep spirits high and learn how to go into practice every day knowing that I’m working for something, a longer-term goal.

“If we’re a day out from a game, I’m not working for ‘let’s get ready for tomorrow’s game to go and drop 20.’ Go out there, work for getting better

mentally, get better prepared to lead a team next year.”

The curiosity coming into the 2021-22 season, without Simms, was whether Hall could rise to the occasion. After scoring just six points in the opener with Presbyterian, Hall has scored double figures in every game since. He’s stayed in the lineup despite lingering inflammation in his foot, which probably won’t completely heal before the season’s end.

Even if he’s hurt, Hall is determined to put on a show.

“Whenever people come to games, I know someone is out there, coming to watch me,” Hall said. “I go out there and give it my best, give it my all, because I don’t want someone to go back home disappointed, and I’m playing for the guy beside me.”

He isn’t perfect. Brownell couldn’t believe Hall pumped up the crowd at the free throw line. The first thing Ryan said to Hall after the FSU game was “what were you doing?” But he was more miffed by the block and immediate fist-pumping with the ball still in play.

But his coaches deal with it. Because, for the most part, this is the version of Hall they want to see.

“That’s when he’s in his element of complete and total win mode, grit mode,” Ryan said. “He’s a relentless competitor.”

Clemson’s PJ Hall lends a helpful hand to reporter (me) after Duke game

BY DAVID THOMPSON, THE FAYETTEVILLE OBSERVER
FEBRUARY 11, 2022

CLEMSON, S.C. — There I was, standing alone in the parking lot outside of Littlejohn Coliseum, jumper cables in my hands and a desperate look etched across my face.

It had been almost two hours since the conclusion of Duke’s 82-64 win over Clemson on Thursday night — about the time I filed my story, got to my car and realized my battery was dead.

“Well, I’m screwed,” I said out loud to no one. I checked my phone. 12:30 a.m.

I popped open the hood, praised the lord I remembered to pack jumper cables and preceded to look as pitiful as I could in hopes someone would come to my aid.

Almost immediately I saw headlights emanating from a small four-door sedan from across the parking lot as the driver made their way over to me.

“You need a jump?” A voice called out.

“More than you’ll ever know,” I responded.

That’s how I met Clemson’s 6-foot-10 center PJ Hall for the second time that night.

I had spoken with him briefly a few hours before at the postgame press conference. It was a rough night for Clemson, but Hall had played well, finishing with a team-high 17 points. He was leaving the arena after receiving treatment for a sore foot on which he wore a boot.

“I thought I recognized you,” I said, laughing.

I spent the next 45 minutes with him as we fiddled and jostled with my jumper cables, in a desperate attempt to get my car started. He could’ve left at any time, but he remained patient and kind as I grew frustrated with my own ineptitude.

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“Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll figure this out.”

We passed the time by recapping the game and his vantage point of the dangerous foul by his teammate David Collins on Duke’s Wendell Moore in the first half.

“I thought Coach K was going to fight our entire bench,” he told me.

Hall told me about growing up in Spartanburg and I regaled him with my stories from the road — the time my keys were taken by mistake and I was left stranded at a high school football game, or last year when the Raleigh News & Observer’s Jonas Pope and I were forced to change a tire at 2 a.m. outside the Boston College football stadium, a moment that cemented our friendship.

“We didn’t change that tire,” I told Hall. “That tire changed us.”

I’m not a mechanic, but I’ve jumped a car before. But for some reason, maybe my cables were faulty, we couldn’t get the car started. I told Hall at least five times to go home and leave me here. He’d done enough.

He refused.

He waited with me for nearly an hour until I was able to contact a professional to come jump my car. There’s a happy ending to this story: I did eventually make it back home at 3 a.m.

Before he left, we shook hands and he let me capture the moment on my phone and I thanked him for his time.

“It’s no trouble,” he lied.

“I was happy to help.”

He wasn’t lying about that.

PJ Hall is now my favorite basketball player, and it has nothing to do with basketball.

Clemson basketball player came to the rescue of a stranded reporter

BY ALEXIS CUBIT, THE STATE
FEBRUARY 11, 2022

Clemson center PJ Hall didn’t have any assists during Thursday night’s 82-64 lopsided loss to No. 9 Duke, but he came up with a big one after the game.

The sophomore spent around 45 minutes after the contest helping Fayetteville Observer Duke beat writer David Thompson with car trouble. Following postgame interviews around 12:30 a.m., Thompson was about to leave Littlejohn Coliseum when he realized his car battery was dead. Meanwhile, Hall was parked a few rows away when he saw Thompson flagging him down and went over to help.

“It really wasn’t anything I had to think about,” Hall told The State. “It was out of instinct.” Thompson didn’t recognize Hall until he got closer.

“That’s how I met Clemson’s 6-foot-10 center PJ Hall for the second time that night,” Thompson wrote in a column Friday.

Hall then offered to jump the dead car and the two tried to get the car to work when it became apparent that a mechanic was needed. Thompson, who didn’t get home until 3 a.m., said he told Hall he could go home multiple times, but the Spartanburg native opted to stay until Thompson got help.

They discussed various topics, including Tigers guard David Collins’ foul on Duke forward Wendell Moore, Jr. to which Hall told Thompson, “I thought Coach K was going to fight our entire

bench.” Thompson and Hall captured the moment with a photo of Hall standing between the two cars, which were still connected by Thompson’s jumper cables.

“So, my car battery died outside of Littlejohn Coliseum. Clemson center PJ Hall saw me with jumper cables and drove his car over to help. He’s my new favorite player. @pjhall020,” Thompson captioned the photo after posting to Twitter.

Hall and Clemson stay home to play Notre Dame at 7 p.m. Saturday at Littlejohn Coliseum.

“It’s just something I wish people would see as normal,” Hall said of his actions. “It’s not something that you really have to go out of your way to help somebody else out.”

Brownell, Clemson basketball annually mine talent in transfer portal. Here’s why.

BY SCOTT KEEPFER, GREENVILLE NEWS
FEBRUARY 18, 2022

CLEMSON -- Shelton Mitchell made a lot of impressive moves during his college basketball career, but none more so than his transfer from Vanderbilt to Clemson in 2015.

Two seasons later, Mitchell teamed with fellow transfers Marcquise Reed and Eli Thomas to lead Clemson to its first Sweet 16 appearance in 21 years.

“I got a chance to live out a dream of playing in the ACC and competing against the best,” Mitchell said. “Transferring to Clemson really helped my career.”

And Brad Brownell’s.

Clemson’s basketball coach was rewarded with a new six-year contract and raise after that 25-win season and has been attempting to replicate that success by mining the transfer portal to fill immediate needs since.

The NCAA introduced the transfer portal in October 2018, allowing players to ask a school compliance administrator to place their name in the portal, after which the school had two business days to publicize that information.

In April 2021, the NCAA took things a step further, granting players the ability to transfer once in their careers and be eligible immediately at their new school. Prior to that ruling, players not only had to get permission but also were required to sit out a year before becoming eligible as a penalty for transferring.

Suffice to say that players are capitalizing on this newfound freedom — a record 1,832 players entered the portal during the 2020-21 academic year, according to ESPN. That translates to an average of 5.2 transfers for each of Division I’s 350 college basketball teams.

Unlike Clemson football coach Dabo Swinney, who has been resistant to plunging into the portal, Brownell has become an active player in the transfer market despite admittedly being a reluctant believer in transfers earlier in his career.

Brownell has plucked eight players from the portal during the past four years and a total of 15 since 2012, seven of whom were pre-portal transfers.

“When I was younger, yeah, didn’t think a lot about it — didn’t do as much and it wasn’t as prevalent,” Brownell said. “The longer you’re kind of in it, I saw that it was going to this type of situation. I

thought we’d eventually get to where we are now with kids being able to transfer and not sit out.”

Brownell has had nine players transfer out of his program, but has built a rather impressive track record when it comes to procuring “new” talent, with his incoming transfer success stories outnumbering those of the departures.

Foremost among them was the talented trifecta of Reed, Mitchell and Thomas, who combined to account for 52 percent of Clemson’s point production in 2017-18, but there have been others who emerged as key contributors in recent years, including Tevin Mack, Nick Honor, Avry Holmes and David Skara.

Brownell added a pair of graduate transfers to the mix of this season’s team, bringing in David Collins from South Florida and Naz Bohannon from Youngstown State, both of whom led their previous teams in scoring last year.

Despite Clemson’s losing record this season — the Tigers are 12-14 overall and 4-11 in Atlantic Coast Conference play with five regular-season games remaining — Collins and Bohannon have emerged as solid contributors for the Tigers, with Collins starting 25 games and ranking third on the team with a 10.4 scoring average and Bohannon leading the team in field goal percentage at .547.

“I think we’ve done a good job of making sure that the guys that we bring in, it’s when there’s a direct need,” Brownell said. “Collins and Bohannon this year are two examples — we had a hole with Clyde Trapp not being here. We needed a big strong wing and we really wanted a couple of older guys who were that way.”

An influx of veteran talent can change a team’s fortunes in short order. ACC teams brought in 33 transfers during the past offseason, with Wake Forest leading the way with five newcomers via the portal. The Demon Deacons, who were 6-16 a year ago, are 20-7 and contenders again thanks in large part to those transfers, who represent five of the team’s top seven scorers. That includes Alondes Williams, who was a role player at Oklahoma in his previous stop. Williams leads the ACC with a 19.8 scoring average and is a leading candidate for ACC Player of the Year.

Recruiting ‘second time around’ has worked for Brownell

Sometimes all a player needs is a change of scenery — a new coach, new teammates, a new challenge — in order to flourish. Such was the case for Mack, Thomas and Mitchell, the latter of whom was courted heavily by Clemson before signing with Vanderbilt out of high school.

“Ultimately I transferred to Clemson because of the relationship I had with the staff during my recruitment process in high school,” said Mitchell, a North Carolina native who works in event and sports marketing in Charlotte. “I was in the SEC before and it wasn’t as easy for my parents to come to as many games.

“I always wanted to play in the ACC because of the competition, so once I knew I was transferring, a chance to play in the ACC while also knowing my parents could be at every game meant a lot to me.”

Brownell credits their groundwork with Mitchell during the initial recruiting process with helping secure him the second time around.

“Some of the transfers we’ve had have been kids we recruited the first time,” Brownell said.



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"There have been some kids that we knew and had relationships with, so it was easier to maybe get them. They also were just kids that we thought fit what we really needed.

"It's hard, but we've just been really good about finding the right kid that fits what we do and them understanding when we bring them in that this is our expectation, this is what we see you doing, and making sure that those ideas match so there's a better chance for it to work."

Transfer portal: a blessing or a curse?

In an ideal world, coaches recruit players out of high school and spend the next four years developing that talent. But that approach may be waning in the age of the portal.

"I think what is happening in the big picture is it's really going to affect a lot less recruiting out of the high school ranks," Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton said. "People are going to be more interested in trying to stay old and going to the portal to see who they can get as opposed to the process that we normally have.

"As you try to progress and you lose someone, you realize are you better off getting a high school player or are you better off getting a proven college player who even might be at a mid-major school, but has grown, matured and is old enough that he's not coming in without an understanding of what you have to do at this level?"

"The landscape has really changed in college basketball. Unless you are willing to get in that portal, you're going to have some situations where you're young."

Still, Brownell harkens back to the "good ol' days," when jumping to another school wasn't able to be accomplished so expeditiously and players had plenty of time to ponder their decision while taking a seat on the sideline for a year.

"Our Sweet 16 team had a bunch of kids that were transfers, but they all sat out," Brownell said. "I thought there was real merit in that for them in terms of being with us an extra year or two."

It certainly proved beneficial for Mitchell.

"I needed that year of sitting out," Mitchell said. "It gave me a chance to mentally start over and only focus on the future. It gave me a chance to work on my game and really get a different view of basketball that helped me a lot once I was able to play."

So what does Mitchell think of the immediate eligibility rule and the sheer volume of players entering the portal?

"I believe the new transfer rules are a gift and a curse," Mitchell said. "I think it's a gift because players can control their own destiny and do what's best for themselves and their career.

"But I think it can become a curse when players start to abuse that power. When I was transferring, I had to sit and think if it was truly worth it and be honest with myself about why I was transferring. I think with the new rule, it can be an escape method that sometimes does more harm than good, especially if the player isn't honest with themselves."

Clemson's Chase Hunter breaking through after rough start to college career

BY JON BLAU, POST AND COURIER
FEBRUARY 27, 2022

CLEMSON — As Chase Hunter crossed the midcourt line, the pace of his dribble quickened. The blue-painted lane at Cameron Indoor Stadium was unoccupied. A runway was there if Clemson's third-year guard wanted to fly.

For the first time in his college career, Hunter was ready to touch the rim. He took a couple of hard dribbles past the lane's ACC logo. He gripped the basketball with every finger as his left foot launched his 6-3 frame skyward. Once the rim was within reach, Hunter used his right hand to swiftly jam the ball home.

"That is my son," his mother, Brandi Hunter-Lewis, thought after that Duke slam. "My baby is back."

It was remarkable to think on Jan. 25, 2022, Chase Hunter posted his first dunk in college. On Jan. 18, 2017, a viral video hit YouTube showing the Westlake phenom hopping over a defender on a fast-break jam. This is the Hunter everyone knew in Atlanta, the acrobatic Robin to future No. 1 pick Anthony Edwards' Batman on the AAU circuit. A fearless dunker who went chest-to-chest with anyone in his way.

But everything was in his way at Clemson. A foot injury derailed Hunter's freshman season. A broken finger knocked him out of rhythm in his second year, robbing what remained of his confidence. He was often pulled into the office of Clemson coach Brad Brownell, who wanted to figure out how to avert Hunter's downward spirals of missed shots and foul feelings.

"How do I get your spirit up?"

The only solution Hunter could imagine was shooting until shots went in. Force it through, like he did with dunks.

"Chase, you realize, that's the hardest thing to do in basketball," Brownell said. "If you're only going to have your spirit up when you make shots, man, that's hard to do."

They had to find a different path. The pressure to score had to be reduced so Hunter could be light enough to fly. Dish a couple of assists, Brownell said, and enjoy that. Defend, and take pride in that. Love the game, all of it. Then look to score.

On Jan. 25, 2022, Hunter was finally ready to attack with a purpose. A month later, he seems primed to touch the sky.

This past week, Hunter hit a combined 17 of 21 from the field in two wins, posting a career-high 21 points on Wake Forest, then upping his best to 23 at Boston College. He hasn't dunked a ton, but he's hit pull-up jumpers and clutch 3s. He's ripped past defenders for backdoor cuts and reverse lay-ins.

"If you do something three times, I'm a believer that you're starting to get it figured out," Brownell said. "Anybody can make a play one time. Maybe make it twice. But if you start making plays three times, playing well consistently, then you're pretty good."

The real Chase Hunter may have finally arrived for Clemson. But he didn't just appear out of thin air. The better version is here because a more flawed, frustrated, forgettable Hunter didn't run

from a challenge. Because his coach afforded him room to find his stride. And when the runway presented itself at Duke, Hunter did what he usually does.

He took off.

"That's crazy I've been here three years and that was my first dunk in college. In high school, I used to dunk all the time. That's more me," Hunter said. "We'll be seeing more of that."

Chasing consistency

The first time Ryan Lewis saw the boy fly, it was Hunter's freshman year at Westlake. On any other team, he may have started, but the Atlanta powerhouse was filled with superstar upperclassmen. Hunter found himself coming off Westlake's bench with the Lions up 25 points.

Lewis, who had just married Chase's mom, Brandi, watched as a fast-break opportunity presented itself in junk time. Hunter charged for the hoop, rose up, and the crowd rose with him. They couldn't believe how high the 6-foot freshman had just bounced.

"He missed the dunk," Lewis said. "But everyone was like 'What in the world? Where did that come from?'"

Lewis understood. Hunter's mother was a women's basketball star at Georgia, and his late father, Brice, departed UGA football as the program's all-time leading receiver. Chase's older brother is Western Kentucky linebacker Jaden Hunter, and his young brother is Baylor basketball commit Dillon Hunter. They put holes in the drywall of their mother's house, playing on the Walgreens mini-hoop they duct-taped to it.

In an athletic, competitive family, Chase was a standout. He dove after fly balls in the outfield. He threw himself around on the football field and came home with more bruises than a car-crash victim. He was dunking in eighth grade.

As the director of the Georgia Stars AAU program, Lewis had people in his ear, asking if Chase could be pulled away from the Atlanta Xpress. A newly minted stepdad very much wanted to stay out of it, saying, "You have to talk to Chase about that."

"They pumped him up and stuff and made him come over," Lewis said. "When he did, it was a disaster. It wasn't good."

They were so blinded by the boy's talents, they didn't consider everything else. Chase was a nice kid but also somewhat shy. If he made mistakes, he became unsure of himself. If he didn't feel supported by his coach, he lost confidence.

"Chase is the kind of kid, once he's comfortable, he can do what he's supposed to do," Lewis said. "But if he's not comfortable, two things: He's not going to do what he's supposed to do, and it's going to take him a whiiiiiiiiiii to get comfortable."

In a way, that played itself out at Clemson. Only this bounceback took longer because Hunter was built up so much and fell so far.

After that failed AAU experiment as a freshman, Hunter went back to the Xpress and dominated for a coach, Winfred Jordan, who allowed him to play through mistakes. He worked off Edwards to perfection.

Lewis distinctly remembers one tournament with the Stars about four years ago, scanning the stands because they seemed so empty. He was used to college coaches packing in like sardines

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to watch his kids. But when he hopped across town to watch his stepson, every coach was there. They were locked on Edwards and Hunter, dunking on Team Takeover bigs Armando Bacot (UNC) and Hunter Dickinson (Michigan).

"They went off," Lewis said, "and that's when he became famous."

The exposure was good because it earned Hunter so many opportunities, including an offer from Tom Izzo and Michigan State. It made him a real catch for Brownell in his 2019 class. The excitement only built when Hunter poured in 20-plus points in Clemson's intrasquad scrimmage leading into the '19-20 season. He started his first four games.

But it's hard to have so much success and then confront failure.

Leading into his freshman campaign, Hunter was feeling pain in his foot. He pushed through it because he didn't want to be "soft." But an overuse injury doesn't heal with more use. Hunter played only nine games as a freshman, averaging 5.3 points per game and hitting 38 percent from the field. The next year, he broke his finger, and he was all out of sorts. He scored just 2.9 per outing on 31 percent shooting.

"Getting those injuries, sitting on the sideline and just watching, can kind of break you down and make you think if this happens and keeps occurring over time," Hunter said, "is this really for me?"

Hunter never explicitly told his parents he lost confidence in himself. But Lewis could read between the lines. "Man, I can't really play my game," Lewis recalled Chase saying. "If I do something wrong, I might get pulled from the game."

It honestly surprised Lewis how patient Brownell was. Lewis knows plenty of college coaches, including ones who would have written Hunter off as a failed investment after a couple of bad years. But Hunter couldn't help but wonder when Brownell's patience might run out. Lewis remembers the topic of a transfer being raised once by his stepson. But only once.

"Man, you're crazy. Because guess what? You did this before," Lewis said, referring to Hunter's move from Xpress to the Stars. "You're struggling now. Do you think it's going to get better when you go somewhere new and different and strange? You might struggle yourself out of basketball."

The line was solid in Hunter's mind. He was sticking with Clemson. His coaches had stuck with him.

Sometimes, Hunter would get up 300 shots at a late hour just to clear his head. Brownell kept meeting with him, telling Hunter it's not all about scoring points. His mother, Brandi, who raised three boys and still managed to become a successful real estate agent, selling property to the likes of Cardi B, tried to tell her son that everyone's path is unique. Comparison is the thief of joy.

Lewis, who tends to play the bad cop to Brandi's good, framed the issue more starkly. "His momma will make him feel good, telling him, 'It will come along.' This year, I was like, 'Come on, man. You have to play different. You gotta be different. You gotta be accountable,'" Lewis said. "You don't have to hold yourself back. You're the only one holding yourself back."

Ready for liftoff

Entering a Jan. 22 matchup with Pittsburgh, Hunter's stat line wasn't eye-popping. He was averaging 4 points per game off the bench, hitting a more respectable 40 percent. But what Brownell saw in practice convinced him to insert the 6-3 guard into the starting lineup.

What he'd seen was important enough, Brownell made it the subject of a postgame speech.

"He was a highly recruited player, things haven't gone smooth," Brownell told his team in the locker room. "He's worked his tail off, and he is what is right about sports. He's what is right about our program and how we do things."

Brownell likes to talk about "Clemson Grit." Hunter was its personification.

"If you'll buy into what we do and keep building, keep working, and not make excuses, and take ownership and stick with it, you're going to eventually get there," Brownell continued.

Brownell held out a fist, and Hunter rose from his chair to walk toward him, gaze lowered, fist forward. As player and coach pounded fists, the room burst into celebration. David Collins put his arms under Hunter's armpits and lifted him in the air.

They have all seen what Hunter can be at his best. Against Pitt, it was 13 points on 4-of-5 shooting, but he also had five rebounds and three assists. That was the first of four straight games in double figures, including 12 points, seven boards and five assists at Duke. In four of his next five games, Hunter failed to reach 10 points. But it didn't send his confidence into the gutter.

In his last three, with frontcourt stars P.J. Hall and Hunter Tyson sidelined, the Tigers' guard has posted 10, 21 and 23 points. Those numbers have gone up only because Brownell needs his guards to pick up the slack with Hall and Tyson out.

Chase Hunter's mind isn't transfixed on scoring, which has, paradoxically, laid the groundwork for him to play freer and score.

"He started having a lot of assists, that got him more excited. Then he started guarding different guys, doing a good job," Brownell said. "So now he's becoming a well-rounded player, which is a huge step. But he's a talented enough young man to do that."

Those in Hunter's circle are just grateful for Brownell not giving up on the high-flying guard.

"He went through a tough time mentally, a tough couple of years. I don't think it can be tougher for any kid. Most kids would have checked out," Lewis said. "He got through it. Now, he's starting to see the sunlight."