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Clemson head coach Brad Brownell talks with an official during a ACC Tournament semifinal game against Duke on March 13. JIM DEDMON/IMAGN IMAGES

Meet Staley's secret weapon behind USC's success

Lulu Kesin
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK - SOUTH CAROLINA

COLUMBIA — Dawn Staley got a chance to screen a movie early but she couldn't get her TV to play.

So she called Hudson Jacobs — the man whose video expertise has been pivotal to South Carolina women's basketball's success since 2011.

Jacobs has been instrumental to the 10 SEC regular-season titles, nine 30-win seasons, seven Final Fours, five Coach of the Year honors and three national championships. They all came after Staley made that first call to Jacobs 15 years ago after her third season with the Gamecocks.

"Hudson is our unsung hero," Staley said, "great, great, great, great guy."

There's a piece of Jacobs in every bit of South Carolina's success and for March Madness his role reaches its peak impact. After falling short of the SEC Tournament title to Texas, the confetti-less locker room fuels an even stronger hunger to succeed on a bigger stage.

The No. 4 overall seed Gamecocks (31-3) want to cut down the nets for a fourth national championship and will begin that quest at Colonial Life Arena on March 21 against either Samford or Southern (1 p.m. ET, ABC).

Staley will require the best from everyone and that includes Jacobs.

How Dawn Staley got Hudson Jacobs to South Carolina

Staley had South Carolina headed in the right direction but still hadn't made the NCAA Tournament when someone floated Jacobs' name to her at an AAU tournament after hearing she had a video job to fill.

Jacobs was a former multisport athlete and son of a coach who turned to stats and video after suffering too many injuries. He started as a manager and did video for Hall of Fame coach Kay Yow at NC State.

He had just one season of full-time

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Gamecocks video coordinator Hudson Jacobs works during their game against Mississippi on Feb. 22 at Colonial Life Arena in Columbia.

JEFF BLAKE/IMAGN IMAGES

Under the radar

Boeheim says Clemson's Brownell doesn't get more recognition due to lack of tournament success

Derrian Carter
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK - SOUTH CAROLINA

CLEMSON — Clemson basketball has aged like fine wine under coach Brad Brownell.

In his first eight seasons starting in 2010-11, the Tigers were 149-113 (67-73 ACC) with two Men's NCAA Tournament bids, including a Sweet 16 in 2018.

But Clemson couldn't compete consistently in an ACC filled with coaching titans, including Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, Virginia's Tony Bennett and UNC's Roy Williams.

In his next eight seasons, Brownell

evolved. He led Clemson to a 167-93 (91-61) record with four March Madness appearances, including a Sweet 16 and an Elite Eight in 2024.

He became the ACC's longest-tenured coach as those legends retired or departed and Clemson's winningest coach.

But it has gone under the radar as ACC Tournament titles, Final Fours and national championship appearances have eluded Brownell.

"They don't notice you (nationally) until you do something in the tournament," Basketball Hall of Famer and former Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim told the The Greenville News. "It

doesn't mean you're not a good coach. That's not always easy to do. It's hard to do, and that's the last step to make that, kind of, breakthrough."

Brownell will be on the doorstep of a national breakthrough, again, when No. 8 seed Clemson (24-10) faces the No. 9 Iowa (21-12) in the first round of the NCAA Tournament on March 20 (6:50 p.m. ET, TNT) in Tampa, Florida.

The winner will face either No. 1 seed Florida or No. 16 Prairie View/Lehigh in the second round on March 22.

Still, Brownell, 57, has changed the perception of the Tigers.

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Predictions for South Region games in Greenville

Evan Gerike
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK - SOUTH CAROLINA

March Madness is in Greenville.

Four teams will play in the South Region in the first round of the men's NCAA Tournament on March 19 at Bon Secours Wellness Arena in Greenville. No. 3 Illinois will take on No. 14 Penn, while No. 6 UNC will play No. 11 VCU.

Illinois, the fourth-place Big Ten team, returns for its sixth consecutive NCAA tournament appearance. UNC will make its third-straight March Madness appearance after finishing fourth in the ACC. Excluding 2020, when there was no NCAA Tournament due to COVID-19, UNC has made 14 of the last 15 tournaments.

VCU won the Atlantic 10 Tournament over Dayton, 70-62, after finishing tied for first in the conference in the regular season, earning the No. 2 seed in the tournament. It's the Rams' second consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance and third in four years.



Illinois head coach Brad Underwood, left, talks with guard Kylan Boswell during a game against UCLA on Feb. 21. ROBERT HANASHIRO/IMAGN IMAGES

Penn has returned to March Madness for the first time since 2018, earning a spot after taking down Yale in the Ivy League Tournament.

Junior forward T.J. Power hit a buzzer-beating 3-pointer to send the game to overtime and finished with 44 points in the 88-84 win.

Illinois' offense, Keaton Wagler are 3-pointer heavy

Illinois could go as far in the NCAA Tournament as its 3-point shooting takes it. The Fighting Illini run a 3-point heavy offense, shooting the 10th-most 3-pointers in the nation.

Illinois has taken 1,006 3-pointers, scoring at a 31.4% rate. Freshman Keaton Wagler has taken a team-high 184 shots from beyond the arc and is second on the team with a 40.2% shooting percentage. Six Illini have taken more than 100 3-pointers. All are making at least 30% of them.

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Greenville

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Familiar foe for Penn basketball coach Fran McCaffery

The scouting report for Penn won't be too difficult to put together. That's because Penn coach Fran McCaffery, the Iowa coach from 2010-25, has plenty of experience playing the Fighting Illini.

McCaffery is a Penn alum and begin his coaching career as an assistant at Penn in 1982. Over 40 years later, McCaffery took over the helm of his alma mater after being fired by Iowa. His final game leading the Hawkeyes ended in a 106-94 loss to coach Brad Underwood's Illinois team.

McCaffery has helped turn around Penn, leading the Quakers to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2018. He guided Penn to an 18-11 record, a 10-win improvement from 2024-25. The Quakers will be hunting for their first NCAA Tournament win since 1994, when they defeated Nebraska, 90-80, as a No. 11 seed.

Illinois vs Penn prediction in March Madness first round

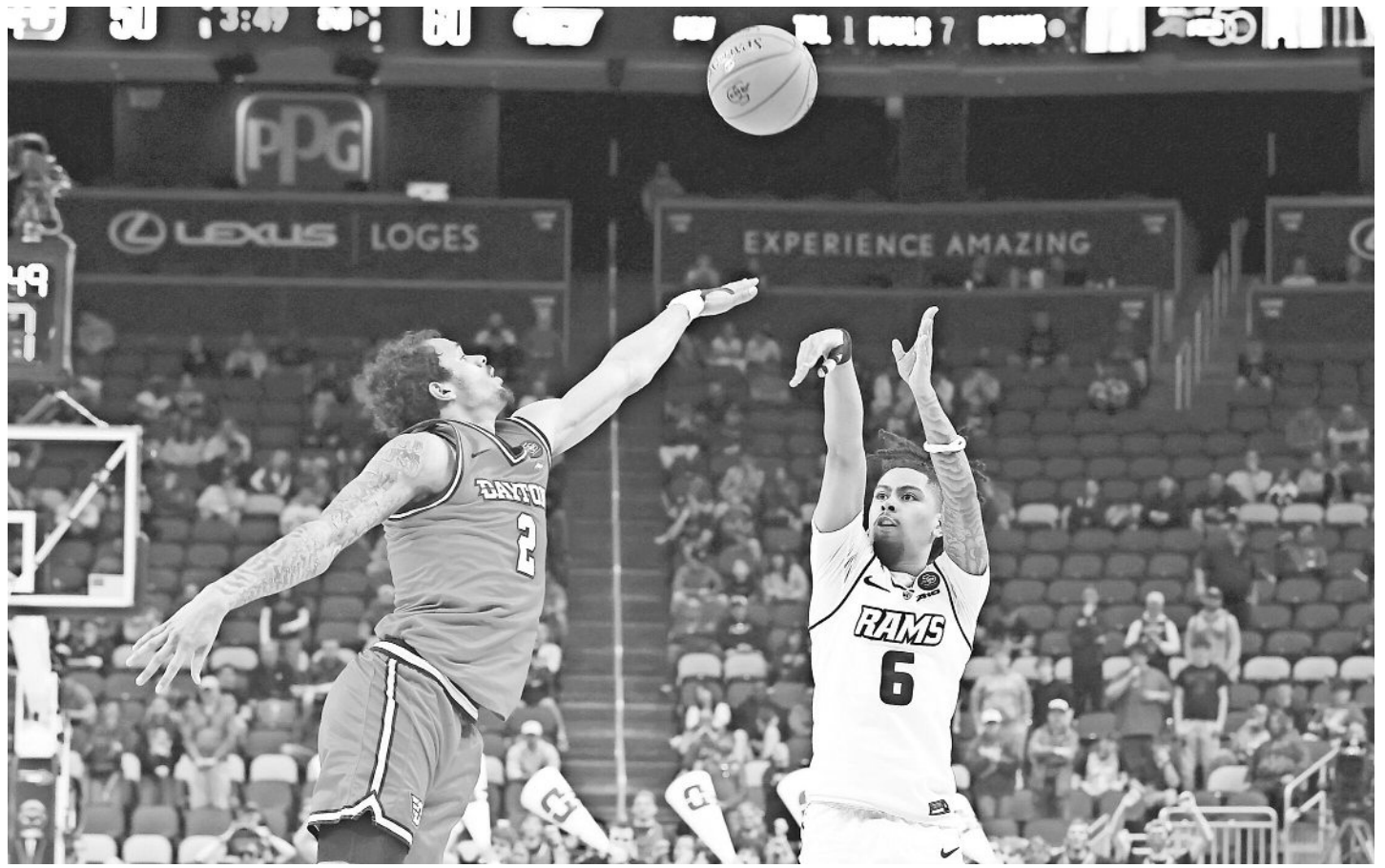
With five different players averaging at least 10 points per game, the Fighting Illini have shown they have plenty ways to win a game. Penn pulled off an upset to make the tournament, but it will need a lot to go right to do it in March Madness.

McCaffery's background won't be enough for the Quakers to find a way to win this one. Expect Illinois to handle business and advance to the second round.

Prediction: Illinois 86, Penn 66

UNC learning to play without star freshman Caleb Wilson

North Carolina has spent its last eight games playing without star freshman Caleb Wilson, but it learned that Wilson would miss the remainder of the



VCU's Terrence Hill Jr. (6) shoots against Dayton's De'shayne Montgomery during the Atlantic 10 Tournament championship game on March 15. CHARLES LECLAIRE/IMAGN IMAGES

season less than two weeks ago.

Wilson missed seven games after suffering an injury in a loss against Miami on Feb. 10. He was working to return to the Tar Heels ahead of postseason play but suffered a broken thumb March 5 that required season-ending surgery. UNC dropped its next two games – its regular season finale against No. 1 overall seed Duke, and its ACC Tournament opener against Clemson.

The Tar Heels will continue to rely on Henri Veesaar and Seth Trimble, who are averaging 16.7 and 14 points per game, respectively.

VCU enters March Madness as one of nation's hottest teams

Few teams in the country are hotter

than VCU.

The Rams have won 16 of their last 17 games. Their only loss came on the road against Saint Louis, a No. 9 seed in the NCAA Tournament bracket.

Three different Rams are scoring double figures per game, led by Terrence Hill Jr. and Lazar Djokovic, who average 14.4 and 13.8 points per game, respectively.

UNC vs VCU prediction in March Madness first round

The Rams are one of the hottest teams in the country against a team that hasn't looked as strong without its star freshman on the floor.

The 11-over-6 upset pick is one of the trendiest every year when people select

their brackets, and this matchup may be one of the most popular.

Prediction: VCU 77, UNC 74

More games in Greenville

Also in Greenville, four teams will play in the East Region in the first round on March 19 at Bon Secours Wellness Arena. Duke (32-2) is the No. 1 overall seed and will face No. 16 seed Siena (23-11) at 2:50 p.m. (CBS). Ohio State (21-12) is the No. 8 seed and will face No. 9 seed TCU (22-11) at 12:15 p.m. (CBS).

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Brownell

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After being the fourth team out of the NCAA Tournament in 2023, Clemson has made three straight March Madness appearances for the first time since 2010. He has guided the Tigers to at least 23 wins in four consecutive seasons for the first time in program history.

"We've certainly earned respect here, especially over the last decade with Sweet 16s, Elite Eight, a lot of solid finishes in our league," Brownell said. "Proud of that. Not satisfied, want to keep going."

How Brad Brownell turned his tenure around at Clemson

Brownell replaced Oliver Purnell, who left for DePaul in 2010 after leading Clemson to three straight March Madness appearances but no wins.

Brownell led the Tigers to the NCAA Tournament in his first season but did not make it back in the following six sea-

sons. After the 2017 season, former athletic director Dan Randakovich released a statement that Brownell would have at least one more season.

Clemson made March Madness in 2018, which earned Brownell a contract extension. Yet, he credited the turnaround for his years of "friendraising," building support for basketball that helped lead to renovations to Littlejohn Coliseum and construction of new facilities.

Those included the Swann Pavilion, a new practice facility, and premium seating for donors.

Brownell said these upgrades were crucial to Clemson's ability to recruit and develop talented high school players, including Hunter Tyson, Chase Hunter, PJ Hall and Ian Schieffelin, who helped lay the foundation of the program's current trajectory, and land transfers.

"He survived, flourishing in the league, and he deserves a lot of credit," Boenheim said. "Somebody once said, 'It's not easy when everybody's out to get you and they can't.'"

Why this was Brad Brownell's best coaching job at Clemson

Virginia Tech coach Mike Young recalled hearing people watch Clemson in the offseason and tell him that the Tigers didn't look very good.

"I've heard that before," Young said. "I know that guy down there blowing the whistle. He'll get them right."

Brownell entered this season with a contract extension after Clemson set program records for total and conference victories in 2024-25. But he had to overcome the largest roster overhaul in his tenure. He lost seven players to exhausted eligibility, including All-ACC players Hunter and Schieffelin, and six players to transfer portal.

Brownell brought in four freshmen and six transfers (five from mid-major programs) to join three retained players, led by Dillon Hunter, who was the only returner to play in games last season.

Like a pickup game with strangers, those 13 Clemson players gelled without any playing experience with each other, except for Dillon Hunter and RJ Godfrey.

The Tigers were picked to finish sev-

enth in the preseason ACC poll, but they tied for fourth in the conference standings, made the ACC Tournament semifinals and reached March Madness.

"When the kids really understand that it's their team, embraced the principles and the concepts and work really hard to do them on each possession, you got a chance to win at the highest level," said former UNC Wilmington coach Jerry Wainwright, who had Brownell as an assistant on his staff from 1994-2002.

Now, Clemson has another shot to make an NCAA Tournament run, which would elevate Brownell's status even though that's not what he's focused on.

"He's proud of what the basketball program represents in a great league, and I think he is driven more by trying to make it better and keep it at the top than he is worrying about what anybody else says," Wainwright said.

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Jacobs

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video work with the Charlotte men's and women's basketball teams when Staley reached out for an interview.

But it was enough and since August 2011, Jacobs hasn't left. And he has no desire to.

Hudson Jacobs' role for South Carolina, Dawn Staley

In the corner of Carolina Coliseum, where South Carolina practices, sits Jacobs' lab.

South Carolina players and coaches pull up chairs as Jacobs sits at two tables pushed together with a setup like a DJ.

The players lock into the TVs on the wall with Staley and assistant coaches peppering in comments as Jacobs clicks through videos and statistics.

Jacobs, 42, is responsible for giving everyone film, ranging from opponent scouts, South Carolina practice and game film. He also provides analytical elements and stats that help the Gamecocks.

But he isn't just pushing buttons or relaying numbers.

"He's an extra set of eyes," said point guard Maddy McDaniel. "He sees things we don't see. He does a lot for us and definitely gives us an advantage since

he knows a lot about the game ... he just sees a lot more than other video guys."

Staley and her coaches adjust things as Jacobs provides the visual aid.

"He is the connector of all things basketball to our coaches and our players," Staley said. "Not just coaches. Everybody asks Hudson for his expertise and he comes through every single time."

How Hudson Jacobs' job for South Carolina changed this season

A new but vital element to Jacobs' job this season came when the NCAA approved coaches challenges in the women's game.

Every coach gets unlimited challenges but a unsuccessful one takes away a timeout.

Jacobs sits to Staley's left during games, knowing after nearly every whistle her head will whip around to the scorer's table.

Was the call correct? "If I don't have a good look or solid feel, I'll tell her," Jacobs said. "I just go with what I see."

In a few seconds, Jacobs must decide if the call is worth challenging.

In the third quarter of the SEC Tournament semifinal vs. LSU, the ref signaled South Carolina's Joyce Edwards last touched a ball that went out of bounds. But seconds later Jacobs twirled his finger.

That was his signal to Staley to appeal, and the crowd at Bon Secours

Wellness Arena in Greenville roared at the sight of his confidence.

The refs reviewed the call and changed it, giving the ball to South Carolina instead. McDaniel hit a 3-pointer to go up seven points for the Gamecocks' largest lead of the game that helped seal a 19th straight victory over the Tigers.

One of the biggest second-half plays started with Staley's trust in Jacobs' judgment. He estimated he has about an 80% success rate this season.

"Hudson is probably equally as competitive as all of us," Staley said. "He wants to win, he works to win. He's got a good eye. Like, I trust Hudson with my life, not just making a call to appeal."

March Madness is where Hudson Jacobs shines for South Carolina

In March Jacobs camps out. He mobilizes his usual practice setup in a quiet spot of a media work room, running on equal parts relentless pursuit, chocolate and sweet tea.

In his normal work week, he has more time to prepare, with gaps between games and a schedule set months in advance against opponents that usually are more familiar.

But March Madness means new opponents and new systems to learn in the span of days, sometimes just 24 hours. Jacobs must provide film to completely familiarize every coach and player with who they'll be facing the next game, while also juggling preparation for hy-

pothetical matchups along the bracket.

"Being a former athlete, you learn to block out the tiredness, block out the things that are going to get in your head and keep you from getting done what you need to get done," Jacobs said. "You've got so many other people depending on you, working hard to get their jobs done, to do their part, that you know you got to do yours too."

For Jacobs, March Madness is long nights cutting film that may not see the light of day. It's preparing for an opponent South Carolina may never play with a constant fear that the NCAA Tournament may end unexpectedly.

"I think that's where it separates the people that become successful," Jacobs said. "That competitiveness in you, when things might not be useful, but you're doing it anyway because you know it's what's going to help you get there."

But March Madness is where someone like Jacobs thrives.

"Something that coach really puts on all of us is we know she's going to go all in, so you better be all in too," Jacobs said. "If you're not doing everything you can to be successful, to get that edge, too, then you're probably not going to reach that level of success."

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