

Jameer Nelson Press Conference Transcription Saint Joseph's University - May 17, 2018

OPENING REMARKS –

Dr. Mark C. Reed, University President

Good morning and thank you all for being here today. We are delighted to have Jameer back on campus and look forward to celebrating his graduation this weekend along with close to 2,000 other student that will be graduating from St. Joe's this weekend. Jameer completing his degree is significant on many levels and it means a great deal to so many people who look up to him and care about him. The University couldn't be happier to count Jameer among our Hall of Fame and now among our alumni. More than that, St. Joe's is proud of Jameer because he models what we seek to instill in our students, a deep, lifelong appreciation for education, and that appreciation stuck with Jameer for all these years and will serve him well into his future. I had the pleasure of meeting Jameer about three years ago when I arrived here on Hawk Hill as president and we talked at that time about him completing his degree, which was already underway. And I told him it would be an honor to shake his hand when he came across the stage and we look forward to doing that on Saturday. Thank you very much.

Don DiJulia, Director of Athletics

It was an early Saturday morning, 9 o'clock, in Los Angeles – April 10th, 2004 – when John Wooden walked up to the stage. And yes, even John Wooden had to open the envelope to announce that year's Wooden Award winner. He opened it and I literally remember him pausing and after he thought of what to say – he said, 'This year's best college basketball player also has the best smile in America' – and then he said 'Jameer Nelson'. Many of you know that Phil Martelli finished his college career at Widener in Chester, I finished my high school career in Chester and when Jameer came here, Phil and I affectionately referred to him as the 'little guy from Chester'. But now he's also a big guy because of this great accomplishment. Certainly we're excited, mainly for him. When you make a commitment to something and you stick to it, and achieve it, how proud one becomes. So you can imagine how proud he is that he kept his commitment – first to his mom and then to his family. We were certainly proud of Jameer then and we're proud of him still today. And if it were easy to do what he did, then everyone would do it. And you know everyone has not done what he committed to do. You know he's an All-American player, Player of the Year and NBA All-Star, etcetera, but he's also an All-American person. He was then and he is now, so we're proud of Jameer's commitment to remain a Hawk forever.

Jameer Nelson

First, I would like to thank the University for believing in me and like Don said, I come from Chester and not knowing at some points in my life if I was actually going to college. And going through the recruiting process as a student-athlete not knowing what college I was going to, and then I decided on St. Joe's. You know Phil [Martelli], Don and everyone here on Hawk Hill made me a promise that they're going to do everything for me in their power to help me succeed in life, on and off the court. I felt that just as important for myself and my family, as it would be for the University, was for me to complete my studies in sociology.

Q: What does this mean to you, your family, and all of the people in Chester that raised you at the high school, Boys Club, etc.?

Nelson: It means a lot. No matter what I've done in my career, on the court I've always modeled myself to be and have always wanted to be the best person I can be and looked upon as a role model. This is something I wanted to do for the city of Chester, the University, my family, and my closest friends.

Q: How important is it for student-athletes to not only use their platform to get into college but to excel and earn a degree to better their future?

Nelson: It's definitely important. When you're a kid, you have dreams of going to college and dreams of doing things after college. To be honest with you, for the kids that are out there listening, college is going to be and should be the best years of your life. It will help you develop as a person. You go to college as a young adult, and some think they can come out as an old adult, but you live on and you take those things that you learned in college along with you. For myself, that's the truth. I learned a lot here and was taught a lot here, like how to be a teammate, how to be a pro before I was a pro, and how to be a student. Growing up in Chester, you're not in the best school district. But when you come here to St. Joe's, you have so much support and so many people to back you. I can't even tell you how many tutors I had and how many practices I missed just to meet with tutors. It was a struggle for me. But the most important thing for me was to get things done then, and also now.

Q: The league has changed so much now, and when you left school, you left just credits short of graduating. Now you have kids coming out after one year, and they're coming out years away from getting their degree. As difficult as it was living an NBA lifestyle to get those credits, what would you tell them in terms of finding a way to do the work and get their college degrees?

Nelson: People say all the time that anything can be done. That's only true if you want to do it. You can say it, but the person that's receiving that message has to want to do it and accomplish what it is that they want to accomplish. To the guys that are coming out after one year of college, let's not kid ourselves, if we were able to do that and go make millions of dollars, every one of us would probably do it. So it's not a knock on those guys. But if they want to go back to college and receive their degree or study something else . . . to learn about whatever they want to learn about . . . that's up to them. I encourage people to do things the way they want to do it but, more importantly, to do something positive.

Q: For the kids who are watching this story, maybe in Chester or certain neighborhoods, they look at you and see a famous basketball player who has reached the pinnacle. What would you say about the value of education, and what was the hardest part about coming back here to finish your coursework?

Nelson: I basically would tell the kids that your education will follow you much farther than a basketball would. I listened to George Raveling last year [at the 2017 Big 5 Basketball Hall of Fame], and he said that basketball was his GPS, and that's exactly what it was for me. I used basketball, I used the platform of the sport to take me to places that I'd never seen and had never

been to and never would have gone to, things I never would have accomplished if never for the sport. You also have to take advantage of that opportunity and turn it into something positive, like school. My parents weren't going to be able to afford college, so my thing was that I was going to do whatever I could do to help my parents out.

The fear [was the hardest part about coming back to SJU.] I had talked about it numerous amount of times with different people, and it was just the fear of doing it and not knowing what to expect. I didn't want to read a ton of books anymore. I didn't want to go to class and sit in front of a teacher for three hours in a night class like I used to do. Technology nowadays helps out a lot. One of the things I did with my last course, it was called ZOOM, and I was able to FaceTime the teacher and we were able to break down my papers and assignments. I was able to see everything on my iPad. I'm still amazed that you can do that stuff, because I'm not very technologically sound, but I do what I can do.

Q: You said you were a little afraid to come back, but you're going to basically walk down and get your name called back at the school where you were a flat out star. What do you think your emotions are going to be like when you hear your name called at the place where you've heard your name called 10,000 times before, to have your name called that you graduated from St. Joe's after more than a decade?

Nelson: I actually have that same feeling right now that I had when I was about to get drafted. Kind of like a couple days before the Draft, I had that anxious, nervous feeling of not knowing what to expect. I just keep telling myself not to trip. I'm going to get up and just like the NBA Draft, you shake somebody's hand, give them a hug, and walk down the stage. But this to me is a bigger accomplishment and the biggest accolade I can receive.

I think so [on graduating being bigger than getting drafted for him.] At a certain time in my life, I knew I was going to be an NBA player. I was fortunate to know that. I didn't know if I was going to come back and get my degree. I didn't know. So that's the bigger part for me, not knowing and then doing it. I wasn't scared to go to the NBA or the Draft. I was scared to come back and receive my degree. I tell people all the time, we're all able to do things physically, but it's all right here; whatever you have in your mind, that will separate you from others to accomplish anything you started or to accomplish anything you want to start.

Q: What interests you about sociology and how to you plan to use your degree in future endeavors?

Nelson: Sociology is interesting to me, so many parts of it. The most important part was for me, coming from Chester, to understand why certain people act a certain way. It's the study of society, and it shows you why things happen a certain way. I should be and think I am a little smarter than I was 14 years ago, so it helped me out throughout my first 14 years in the NBA. I think one of the most important courses that I've taken was a leadership course, and hopefully that'll help me out 14 years later down the line after this or however many years it's going to be when I retire and decide to either coach, work in the front office, or whatever I want to do inside the game of basketball. There are so many different ways you can lead. We don't all know that. We don't know that we are all leading in our own ways, and one of the most important things that I took from that was how to empower people so they can hold themselves accountable.

Q: When you originally left here, how many credits shy were you and how many credits were you taking online?

Nelson: I was taking my classes online and doing independent studies. It was some core classes and a couple of electives. I took a religion class, some sociology classes, and a leadership class.

Q: When you went on your run with Saint Joseph's, I was in high school watching you. It inspired me to want to go to St. Joe's. Explain what the possibility of the NBA getting rid of the one-and-done will impact high schoolers and below?

Nelson: First and foremost, you can't tell somebody not to go make millions of dollars. I'm not sure the NBA will ever get away from the one-and-done. I'm not sure if they should or shouldn't, I'm indifferent to be honest with you. But the one thing I know is when you become an NBA player, you're a man, and when you become a WNBA player, you're a woman. You have to be grownup and go through things in college that will help you out later on in life. So would going to school for three or four years help people? Yes, if that's what you're asking, I think so. Call it what it is though, those people and guys and girls are trying to make a living as well, just like anybody who wanted to become a doctor or anyone else. You strike the iron when it's hot, and sometimes it's hot after one year for certain guys and girls. I'm not against it and I'm not for it. Everybody is going to do things their own way. It's a tough decision for all families. I entered the draft my junior year and I decided to go back on my own. Nobody convinced me. Could I have gone to the NBA that year? Yeah, I could have. But for me, it was more important for me to come back, and I felt I wasn't ready for the NBA physically, mentally, or emotionally. You just have to be honest with yourself as a kid and just have to deal with the consequences as they come, because there's going to be consequences no matter what decision you make.

Q: What are your plans going forward in terms of getting that 15th year?

Nelson: Right now, I'm just preparing myself to play. I'm still working out and have never taken a summer off from working out. I don't even think when I retire I'll take a summer off, because I've never taken a summer off. I'm just preparing myself to play like every other year. I'm a free agent and I feel like there's teams out there that will need my services for their younger players and to play the game as well.

Q: Have you heard from any of your college teammates?

Nelson: I always talk to those guys. I talk to them throughout the year. We all stay in contact in some kind of way. We're all living our lives a little different. Everybody has different obligations and everybody has things that are time consuming, so you're not able to meet up with those guys as much as you would like but knowing that you have former teammates from college to have your back and reach out to congratulate you and vice versa, I always reach out and try to maintain contact as much as possible.

Q: In reference to how he got all of the work done.

Nelson: On game days, most people know not to bother me because I'm preparing for the game. But on practice days and travel days and sitting in hotel rooms, I'd just knock things out in terms of the work. I had other things going on outside of basketball and school and family, but you have to manage your time wisely and that's one of the things going back that Phil [Martelli]

taught me. I don't know exactly what it was, but he put this ladder on a piece of paper and turned that into a timeline. That was one of the reasons why I went in his office that day, because I was struggling with my timing and things were overwhelming because I was becoming Jameer Nelson. So he broke it down for me and told me, 'You have to be better with your time and manage things better.' Still to this day, people ask me why I get to practice an hour early, because I was taught to be early to be on time. That's one of the things that I'll always take with me from Phil and from the University.

Q: How different was taking classes in college vs. doing it now with traveling? Were there similarities?

Nelson: No similarities at all. It was a little weird. My first class when I went back was a religion class. I was doing my work and I was doing my reading. My regular life has taken over me, which is my family and basketball. I forgot I was in class and I went on vacation and missed a week and got an F [on an assignment], but as a class, we were able to drop the lowest grade. It woke me up and made me realize that it's a lot different than going to class and seeing people and having a reminder. I'm a lot older now and I hope smarter and wiser, so I wised up and set time aside to do things and would do things accordingly . . . I got a good grade overall. If I had been taking classes and doing my work the way I've done it the last two-and-a-half years, I probably would have been on the Dean's List.

Q: You just retired after dedicating almost all of your adult life to student-athletes. For a moment like this for you, how does it feel to see Jameer come, back, complete his degree, and graduate?

DiJulia: This is a special moment. I guess among the favorite things in my position over the years is watching the dedication and the joy of when student-athletes succeed on the court or field or off the court. So this fits into that favorite part of the position, because so much time, effort, and work goes into an accomplished athlete, and certainly being an accomplished, well-rounded person takes a lot of behind-the-scenes work. So just the joy of watching others being joyful for accomplishing something that they wanted to do.

When you're around special people, you learn a lot. I've told this story over the years and I'm sure I'll continue to tell it for many years to come. After Jameer's last collegiate game at the Meadowlands in 2004, when a lot of people in that building and I'm sure this team and a lot of St. Joe's fans believed they were going to win and go to the Final Four, the building was stunningly quiet after two hours of roaring. And what happens after a game is, the athletes and the coach have a 10-minute, cooling-off period. Our fans needed two hours before they left the building to cool off. Some may not have recovered yet. So Jameer, two teammates, and Phil [Martelli] had to walk in and meet the nation's press just 10 minutes after competing and being disappointed. One media writer said to Jameer, 'I guess you're really disappointed that you didn't achieve your ultimate goal of getting to the Final Four.' In my words, what Jameer said was, 'Of course we're disappointed, that's why you compete. We thought we were the best team, and we wanted to win the National Championship, but that wasn't my ultimate goal. I can't answer if I succeeded in my ultimate goal. You'll have to ask Delonte [West] and Pat [Carroll] because my ultimate goal was to be the best teammate anybody ever had.' So we've learned that from the master teammate.

Q: How is Jameer a good representation of what it means to be a Hawk at St. Joe's?

Reed: We have hundreds of student-athletes that compete every year in a variety of sports. We see some that are higher profile than others. But all of our student-athletes come here with the intention, I believe this, to get an education and with the expectation that they will graduate. That's why you come, that's what our student-athletes hear from our coaches, our athletic director, everybody. So when we admit a student-athlete to the institution, that's our expectation. We are making a commitment to them. Some people are going to have an opportunity to do something professionally in sports before that time is up. Jameer was one of those individuals that was able to do that, and we've had others. But in the time that I've been here when we had another guy that was able to go to the NBA and was drafted high, I remember saying the same thing to him that I said to Jameer when I met him, which is, 'I look forward to one day, hopefully I'm still the president, but if not, one of my successors looks forward to handing you your diploma to graduate from the institution.' Why am I explaining that? Because Jameer models what we want from all of our student-athletes. We want student-athletes to come to the institution to study hard and play hard, to accomplish all of their goals athletically and otherwise, and to be part of the student body. I wasn't president when Jameer was a student here, but my understanding is he wasn't some mystery figure on campus. People knew who he was. They sat in class with him, they saw him in the dining hall, and they saw him in and around campus. That is an example that he set for everybody here and models it. Ultimately, as well, that they leave this place infused with this sense of responsibility, not so much in a burdensome sense, but that they're inspired to use what they were given here or learned here to do something for other people. And Jameer does that as well, and he does that through his family, through a foundation that he's been establishing, and all of that. I think how he lives his life and how he conducted himself when he was here at St. Joe's and how he's conducted himself in the NBA . . . He's been a leader everywhere that he's been. When you look at it, not many guys get to have the length of career in the NBA that Jameer has had, and that doesn't just happen because of his basketball talent, although that's considerable. You have to have the total package. It's about leadership, and you have to be able to live your lifestyle in a way that is conducive to performing at your best and balancing the challenges of family obligations and family life with professional obligations and all the notoriety that comes with it. So when you look at his career and where he is today, we are so proud to be able to say he's a Hawk, he's one of us and always will be. And that's how I think he reflects best of what we want for our student-athletes and the best of what we offer here at this University.