

# College basketball doesn't know it yet, but Donnie Tyndall is on his way back

With five years to go in his own NCAA sanctions, former Tennessee coach Donnie Tyndall is back on the bench at Chipola, a junior college in Florida.

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NICEVILLE, Fla. – Minutes before tipoff, his players exit the locker room and jog onto the court, but not him. He waits in the hallway. As college basketball coaches do.

I've often wondered. So I ask: What do coaches do in these solitary pregame moments?

"Pray," says [Donnie Tyndall](#) with a playful grin.

Maybe he's serious. Tyndall doesn't strike you as the devout sort. He swears like a sailor, for one, both in conversation and during practices as the first-year coach at Chipola, a community college in Florida that, not coincidentally, has gotten really good really fast at men's basketball. Tyndall's team made the hour-and-a-half drive to this junior-college state tournament as favorites, the No. 1 seed.

His team is good. The gleam in Tyndall's eye tends to give that away – just as it suggests there's nowhere else he'd rather be than this half-empty gymnasium at Northwest Florida State College, far outside the spotlight of the sport that Tyndall so deeply adores. Even as it hasn't loved him back.

It's Thursday, April 8, 2021.

I'm not sure if Tyndall realizes it, and I don't have the heart to bring it up at that pregame moment. But it's five years — to the day — since the NCAA Committee on Infractions slapped him with one of the harshest penalties in its history. If you know anything about Tyndall, you probably know about that.

An academic fraud case at Southern Miss ended up costing him his job at the University of Tennessee after the 2014-15 season, his only one in Knoxville. Far worse, it meant a [10-year show-cause penalty](#), which all but ended his college coaching career, likely restricting any NCAA member institution from hiring him until April 7, 2026.

By then, Tyndall will be 56. Five years to go, five difficult years down.

Two of them were spent “wasting my life,” Tyndall says, coming to grips with being branded an outcast and the unnerving silence of a cell phone that wouldn’t ring. So many calls – even to those he truly believed were his friends – went unreturned. Job applications were largely ignored. There were two jobs in the NBA's minor league in Mississauga, Ontario, and Grand Rapids, Michigan. And then, finally, the opportunity at Chipola.

“I lost my dream job. I lost \$10 million. Then I lost my career because of the show-cause. Then I go through a divorce,” Tyndall says. “Everything that could have went bad in about a two- or three-year window went bad. ...

“I didn’t know if I’d ever get the chance (to coach in college) again. So to have the opportunity, I don’t take that for granted.”

Tyndall's journey has been tragic, but at this moment, he's no longer a tragic figure.

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The bad memories and bitterness and what-might-have-beens, those all go away for the next couple of hours. Because he's coaching college players again. That doesn't carry the prestige it used to for Tyndall, but by now, it might actually mean more to him.

As he walks through the tunnel to join his team, I wish him luck he won’t need. He'll be cutting a net down in that same gym two nights later, and I'm witnessing something that most of college basketball doesn't know yet:

Donnie Tyndall is back.

## **'I would have coached at Tennessee for free'**

Sports attorney Donald Jackson says you might not hear the anger rising in his voice, but it's there:

“To this day, I have not seen a case involving a coach that’s been more upsetting.”

Jackson’s career goes back nearly 30 years. His role [has often been as an adversary to the NCAA](#). That would create cynicism in anyone, and yet Jackson still professes an idealistic belief in what’s right about college sports.

But what happened to Tyndall – a former client – gives him heartburn, he says.

“I kind of lost faith in the system after Donnie’s case,” Jackson says. “I really did, because the system didn’t work. ... This is a very decent man whose career was destroyed.”

Some still insist that Tyndall could have been the best coach Tennessee basketball has ever witnessed. Better than Ray Mears or Bruce Pearl or Rick Barnes, who was hired to replace Tyndall after he was fired.

"Take the money out," Tyndall says. "I would have coached at Tennessee for free."

That's because – after successful stints at Morehead State and Southern Miss – he was finally where he'd have the talent and resources to compete for a national title.

"And we were going to do that," he says. "We would have been to a couple of Final Fours by now. And I don't mean that arrogantly, but I just know how we coach. I know how we would have recruited, and that's a great job."

He went 16-16 with a rebuilding roster, but he says that he would have built his Vols in a manner similar to what Virginia has done: Hard-nosed, stingy defense. Maybe a one-and-done talent here and there, but a lot of three- and four-year players.

It unraveled quickly. Southern Miss received a verbal notice of inquiry from the NCAA in October 2014. In March, former UT athletics director Dave Hart fired Tyndall over concerns about the seriousness of the case. And because he was fired with cause, UT owed him nothing,

"Technically, from a pure tactician standpoint, Donnie Tyndall is an outstanding basketball coach," Hart said at the time. "I thought he was a very good fit. He fit our profile. But none of that trumps what you have in front of you."

## **A convenient target**

Tyndall says that he's made peace with it.

But he hasn't. Not really.

"I'll never, ever be able to totally get over what was taken away from me," he says, "and in my opinion, so totally over-penalized that there's really no other word to use other than it was just unfair."

In terms of trustworthiness, the profession of college basketball coaching tends to fall somewhere between used-car salesman and three-card monte dealer. In my own career, I've covered more than a few successful coaches — from Jim Harrick to Mark Gottfried to Pearl to Rick Pitino to John Calipari — who've dealt with NCAA issues at one time or another. It's an occupational hazard.

With Tyndall, you can stand on the table to protest his penalty as excessively harsh. But you can't stand on it and profess Tyndall's total innocence.

Tyndall didn't dispute that violations took place at Southern Miss, just his knowledge of them. Players were found to have had others doing academic work for them. Tyndall also had previous NCAA baggage from Morehead State. [In the USM case](#), there were questions about his use of a personal cell phone and the deletion of emails "relevant to the investigation," the NCAA said.

He had been fired by Tennessee and no longer worked for Southern Miss. So he didn't have a college to back him in front of the infractions committee.

In hindsight, all of it made him vulnerable to a vicious NCAA reprisal.



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### **Donnie Tyndall, former Tennessee Vols basketball coach**

Donnie Tyndall, former Tennessee basketball coach

Based largely on the word of Adam Howard, one of Tyndall's former assistant coaches, the NCAA concluded that Tyndall had directed staffers to complete online classwork.

Howard changed his story during the process and ended up receiving immunity, according to Jackson.

“If you are going to destroy a coach’s career,” Jackson said, “you’ve got to have something more credible, something more objectively provable than one witness out of 50. And that’s all they had here.”

Jackson was hired to represent Tyndall during his unsuccessful appeal. The 10-year show-cause stood, requiring any NCAA member school that seeks to hire Tyndall to appear before the committee on infractions and “show cause” why he should be allowed to coach.

For good measure, the NCAA also tacked on – after the 10 years – an additional suspension for half the games of the first season in which he is employed again. Events that happened in 2012 could still be sidelining him 15 years later.

“There were dark days,” Tyndall says. “Other than my (two) daughters and my mom, I really pushed away everybody out of my life. I didn’t want to talk to people.”

Donnie Tyndall will be 56 when the 10-year show-cause penalty ends that he received from the NCAA after an investigation into academic fraud from his...

Since Tyndall’s verdict, college basketball has dealt with an FBI investigation into multiple programs and coaches. Those NCAA cases, for the most part, [have yet to be resolved years later](#).

“I know what was said and written about me and how much of it was 100% inaccurate,” Tyndall says. “So I never ever would judge somebody else, because there’s always two sides to every story. But when you hear things that were on tape or you read things that are actually facts and not innuendoes or rumors or whatever, it just makes you think, ‘10 years?’ It really is mind-boggling that was the penalty.”

## **The road to redemption**

In Marianna, Florida, at the corner of Workforce Way and Hoop Drive, sits sunny college hoops purgatory.

Chipola calls it “The Milt,” more formally the Milton H. Johnson Center.

It’s a nice gymnasium. But few strive to play there — or in any junior-college arena, for that matter. Most players end up at this level because they didn’t have the grades and/or recruiting interest among major programs. Accordingly, there’s no glamour to Chipola or the rural town in which it is located.

“Not anything fun to do outside of basketball,” says sophomore guard Lance Erving. “When we get bored, we come to the gym a lot.”

What's next for Chipola coach Donnie Tyndall? "I'm locked in on knowing I'm going to be here for the next five to six years and maybe forever," he said.

Tyndall chose to leave the NBA G League for Chipola. He felt lucky to get the opportunity, and it was mostly because he missed college basketball. He also respected junior-college hoops in Florida and knew he wanted to retire there one day.

"I'm locked in on knowing I'm going to be here for the next five to six years and maybe forever," says Tyndall. "... I see myself staying here until my show cause is up. If I get another chance, fine. And if I don't, I'll coach here until I retire – or they fire me."

The day prior to the state's junior-college tournament, "The Milt" is alive. Tyndall is everywhere during a Wednesday afternoon practice, a ball of energy, pacing to all corners of the court, shouting instructions.

Erving was one of only two returning players from last season's underwhelming team. Even with Tyndall, Chipola still wasn't expected to do much better. At the end of the regular season, though, it was 18-4 and had won 12 of its past 13 games.

"We've won 12 of 13 by being who we are!" he tells players. By that, he means they defend and strive to an identity of being the "toughest team in the nation."

It's striking to see players respond to Tyndall, hanging on each word. This level is basically a short-term means to an end. They know few are watching, and in this setting, the glory of ol' Chipola alone isn't going to coerce buy-in.

But Tyndall does.

"Coach Donnie Tyndall is so great, it's hard to explain," Erving says. "I've never seen nothing like it before, honestly. He treats this like he's in the SEC or he's in the G-League. ... It's fun, and it's shocking, really, because I wasn't expecting it."

"I've never had a coach that I've loved before," adds sophomore guard Carlos Lemus. "Coach Donnie is real intense, and he demands a lot of stuff of us. He shows tough love, but at the end of the day, he always shows that he cares about us."

## **An end, looking more like a beginning**

Final seconds of the first half: Tyndall is hunched over in a defensive stance, shuffling in front of the bench and screaming, "We need a stop right here!"

The score is 38-19 in Chipola's favor. It stays that way into halftime. They got the stop.

Indeed, this was going to be a long night for Gulf Coast State College. It's overmatched, not in just talent necessarily – in every way.

It's no knock against Phil Gaffney, Gulf Coast's coach who won this tournament last year and was named 2020 coach of the year by the FCSAA. But late in the first half, his team was shooting 18.2% and struggling mightily with an ungodly trapping zone defense. It looked like a 1-3-1 but transformed based on what the offense did.

### **Former Tennessee coach Donnie Tyndall makes comeback at Florida junior college**

With five years to go in his own NCAA sanctions, former Tennessee coach Donnie Tyndall is back on the bench at Chipola, a junior college in Florida.

"I've played against really good coaches that you go with a certain action and they swear up and down you're in man-to-man. But you're not. You just happen to be guarding that action a certain way," Tyndall says. "A lot of time in the film room, and I wasn't sure to be honest if I could get a bunch of freshmen young guys to learn it. ... But they've picked it up and done a great job."

During timeouts, Chipola's players lock arms to form a tight huddle, as opposed to Gulf Coast's players standing loosely. Each time Gulf Coast has possession, Chipola's players on the bench clap and chant "D-Fense." When a Chipola player goes down on the court, four teammates are there immediately to help him up.

None of this guarantees success, of course, but you can't help but notice the team ahead on the scoreboard is the one doing it.

Some good players on each team at this level. Gulf Coast hangs around, cutting the lead to 46-40 early in the second half. Chipola weathers the storm and rolls from there. A 25-5 run takes about seven minutes. Through it all, Tyndall maybe sits down for a few seconds, hopping back up excitedly each time.

Final score: Chipola 84, Gulf Coast 58.

Two nights later, Chipola would win the tournament, rolling by 13 points in the final, becoming state champ for the first time since 2014.

Tyndall climbs the ladder, takes the net in his hand, waves it and puts it around his neck while Chipola's players cheer.

The case against Tyndall, we all know it. For him, we've seen what looked like the end. And maybe it was. Maybe Chipola is where the story ends.

But maybe not.

"Do I want to get back someday? Yes," he says. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't. I do want to get back. Is it the be-all and end-all for me like it was five or six years ago? It's not. And that's not because I'm not hungry and driven. At the end of the day, there's more to life."

The case for Tyndall still having a Division I future as a coach isn't as complicated as you might think. Really, it's as simple as it's still true: He wins.

What is happening in the backwoods of Florida feels like a beginning, not an end.

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