

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Four

Tuesday, March 17, 2026

Dayton, Ohio, USA

UD Arena

**Prairie View A&M Panthers**

**Byron Smith Coach**

**Dontae Horne**

**Cory Wells**

Media Conference



there.

**Q. Dontae, what's clicked here?**

DONTAE HORNE: It's really been our focus on defense. Like he said, we always thought we had the pieces but we had to put it together. And he doesn't give himself a lot of credit, but I'm going to do it. Him and Corey Dunning have set the tempo and what we need to do on defense, and that's what kind of flipped and changed for us.

**Q. Obviously representing not only Prairie View but HBCUs as a whole, what does that mean to you?**

DONTAE HORNE: It means a lot. Like you said, a lot of people probably didn't think we would be here. The fact that we are representing HBCUs means a lot to me.

CORY WELLS: Yeah, it definitely means a lot to be a representative team for HBCU, just pushing the culture and being a part of it.

**Q. You both mentioned this is your first experience. What mentality are you guys looking to bring into the game?**

CORY WELLS: First and foremost, we're going to play hard from the tip. It doesn't matter necessarily who we play. We expect to win. You don't come here to lose. We expect to win.

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, just like Cory said, we're just going to go out there and play hard, play our own game, look at this team like any other team, scout them, make sure we go out there and defend.

We're here in March; we're not here just to say we made it; we're here to win.

**Q. What attributes about this team do you guys like, not just to get past the first game but to be able to make a run in March?**

DONTAE HORNE: I like how we are interchangeable, switchable. That ties into our defense. We can guard 1 through 5, so that's kind of the best attribute to me.

**Q. Dontae, do you have a favorite March Madness moment?**

DONTAE HORNE: No, this is any favorite moment because I'm actually in it.

CORY WELLS: I think Dontae said it best. It's my first time being here, so I think this is my favorite moment so far.

**Q. Knowing that your game was going to be up there, just describe the feeling from the weekend and the ride that you guys have been on. Dontae, I'll start with you.**

DONTAE HORNE: It's been crazy. I just walked in off the court and I realized I'm actually here. Like winning it hasn't even hit me yet until I just walked out on the court and I actually realized that I won a championship and I'm actually here in March.

**Q. Cory, the same feeling and emotion?**

CORY WELLS: Yeah, it just doesn't feel real. It hasn't set in necessarily yet. Maybe I haven't walked on to the court yet, so this is surreal for me right now.

**Q. Cory, talk about this run for the Panthers and what you guys were able to do in the SWAC tournament.**

CORY WELLS: You know, it was an amazing run. I felt like all year we felt like we had the pieces to compete and win a championship.

We just had to figure out how to put it together, and we finally put it together the last couple games of the season going into the tournament, and we just rode that wave from



And our offense gets going through our defense, so we don't really worry about that.

CORY WELLS: I agree. Along with having a good defense, I think we have dynamic play makers. You need that in March. I think anyone on the floor at any given time can get hot and go on a spurt, and that's what you need to show out in March.

**Q. Dontae, what's the best quality of this basketball team?**

DONTAE HORNE: To me it's our chemistry. We have chemistry on the court. I don't know if a lot of people can say that, but a lot of talking, a lot of chemistry. That's probably our best thing?

**Q. Cory, do you agreeing with that?**

CORY WELLS: Yes, I do, along with our fight. It got rough at times, but we stayed together and fought.

**Q. Is there some pride in playing in this game? The last couple years we've seen the SWAC represented in the First Four. For you, Dontae, is that sort of a goal in trying to get here to Dayton and knowing that there's a good chance that the SWAC title is going to be decided and you're going to land in the 937?**

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, it's always the goal. The goal is always to win the title.

**Q. Cory, what are you looking forward to most when the ball goes up tomorrow night?**

CORY WELLS: Man, it's a good question. I would say just -- I'm looking forward to seeing how well we come out as a team and start the game off. We like to start games fast, so I'm looking forward to getting out and just pushing the tempo immediately?

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, same thing he said. We like starting games fast. We're hoping to get off to a strong start, a fast start, and let our defense carry us there.

**Q. What do you think is the best game you guys have played all year?**

DONTAE HORNE: That's a great question. I would say probably Bethune in the tournament. We're usually good at putting a good 20 minutes together no matter if it's the first half or the second half, but I feel like Bethune we played a full 40-minute game.

**Q. Cory, would you agree with that?**

CORY WELLS: Yes, I would agree.

**Q. Cory, in talking about playing in March Madness, it's such a quick turnaround, but you guys' second night here for the First Four, have you been able to look at Lehigh and see anything in order to get ready and prepared for that group out of the Patriot League?**

CORY WELLS: Yes, sir, it's been a quick turnaround, but after you win a game, it's always on to the next. Take what you learned from the last game and move forward. I've had a chance to look at them and I like the matchup.

**Q. Talking about the matchup, what do you think they present in trying to move on into the field of 64?**

CORY WELLS: I think the toughest thing -- we have a saying that we can only beat ourselves. We kind of focus inward. You respect each team that you play and you scout them, but we look forward.

We know what we have to do, take care of the ball, rebound, come off to a fast start, and that's what we're most focused on.

**Q. Dontae, what have you seen?**

DONTAE HORNE: Like the same thing he said. Like on the scout they probably give up a lot of threes, but like he said, we're just focused on the inside and working our way out, so we're more worried about ourselves.

No disrespect to our opponent, but like he said, we can only beat ourselves.

**Q. You guys played a lot of good teams this year, not only in the SWAC but also the non-conference. How do you think that schedule has set you up to make a run in the tournament in March?**

DONTAE HORNE: Our non-con schedule was real tough. We liked the way we fought. A lot of times we was in the game when a lot of people didn't think we would be in the game, and a lot of times we was in the lead when a lot of people didn't think we would be in the lead.

Those non-con games really helped us for situations like now because when we went to non-con games we didn't know nothing about them. Just like we go into March not knowing nothing about our opponent, but we still went out there and fought so that's how I look at it?

CORY WELLS: I think it's kind of similar to some of the matchups this being the First Four and potentially a 16

seed and you go up against a 1 seed. You play these games early in the year and it's very similar to that. You can fall back on that preparation and games to have a sense of what you need to do for the upcoming game.

**Q. Your coach has been a part of this First Four back in 2019. What has he told you about getting ready for tomorrow night and the atmosphere here in Dayton?**

CORY WELLS: He really stressed taking care of the tournament first and everything will kind of come together. He says it's an amazing opportunity; cherish the moment. He said if we're more free out there -- I definitely feel a little weight off my chest after winning the championship.

The job is not finished. We've definitely come here to win. But he stressed just take this in and enjoy this moment.

**Q. Dontae, some of the advice that your coach has passed on getting ready for tomorrow night?**

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, like Cory said, just take this all in. A lot of people don't get this opportunity, and just be grateful and happy that you had this opportunity. Also he stressed taking care of our bodies because it's a quick turnaround, and that's really all.

**Q. Dontae, what was the reaction touching down in Dayton and seeing the snow?**

DONTAE HORNE: It was crazy because we just left from a place that was just hot. Coming to a place that it's snowing, it was wild. I guess it was hot the day before and then today is snow.

**Q. Cory, your thoughts on this winter weather?**

CORY WELLS: It takes me back a little bit. I was in Utah last year, so I'm not too --

**Q. You're used to it?**

CORY WELLS: Yeah, just a little bit. Just a little bit.

**Q. I mentioned your favorite March Madness moment, but I think you grew up with this; is there a game that sticks out that you remember watching that sort of lights you up and provides a smile? Dontae?**

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, when Memphis made the tournament when they had D Rose. It was kind of sick when he had messed around and hurt his ankle, but that moment, seeing that team in March kind of has stuck with me since I watched it. That's probably my favorite March thing.

CORY WELLS: I'd probably say when Trey Burke was at Michigan. That was the most memory that I remember.

**Q. That shot against Kansas?**

CORY WELLS: Yeah.

**Q. Coach, just a statement on what this team has been able to achieve being SWAC champs?**

BYRON SMITH: First of all, thank you guys for having me. It's been a very exciting last 72 hours, knowing that we're coming to Dayton.

But obviously getting into the conference tournament, we just started playing really, really good basketball. Defensively we really picked it up, and offensively we shared the basketball, and we always seemed to make the right play.

My hats off to my team. Got hot at the right time, and obviously being a lower seed in three of the four games that we played, I think that speaks volumes just about when you work together and you play together and you play as a unit, great things can happen.

**Q. Before this run, was there a moment in the season where you felt like you could hoist that SWAC trophy?**

BYRON SMITH: I mean, several times, but just kind of seemed like every time we felt that way we would stumble a little bit and not play very well and drop a game or drop two games.

I kept telling our guys we're going to be a good team, we just have to come together at the right time. Obviously it's difficult when you're bringing in 11, 12 new guys and we just flipped our roster and it took our chemistry a little time to get going, and thank God we hit it at the right moment in the conference tournament and we're here now.

**Q. Was there anything in particular that clicked with this unit?**

BYRON SMITH: I think when we inserted Corey Dunning, our starting 5 man into the starting lineup. He's a very laterally athletic, not necessarily vertically athletic player. He can really move his feet and he can guard out on the perimeter; he can guard the wing and obviously he can guard the rim.

We inserted him into the lineup we were able to switch 1 through 5 on our ball screens and that's when things really clicked and took off for us.

**Q. Dontae and Cory were up here and mentioned chemistry has been a big part of the Panthers' success. Would you agree with that, and why is it that sort of this group is so tight and close?**

BYRON SMITH: Obviously chemistry and fit and timing are critical components to any team's success in any sport.

But again, as I said, when you're bringing in new guys all the time, sometimes it takes a little bit longer for their chemistry to kick in. It wasn't always good because we shifted our lineup four or five times throughout the season, but it's just this final lineup again.

But the insertion Corey Dunning, that's when we felt we were complete and we started playing some of our best basketball. The chemistry has been great on the offensive end. They pass up good shots to get great shots. They don't care who gets the credit.

Defensively they're all greedy to be the best defender on the floor. Everything has kind of come into place at the right time for us.

**Q. You highlighted your best basketball. When is Prairie View A&M at their best?**

BYRON SMITH: Well, again, when we're defending at a high level and we're really, really, really aggressive on the boards.

We're not the biggest team in the conference. Not the biggest team anywhere. But when we can rebound the basketball, share the basketball, and just really playing hard, because it's always been -- our signature has always been always to try to be the hardest playing team out on the floor, and we do that every night.

We really play hard. We get after you. We're scrappy. We like to trap blitz and get out in the passing lanes off a play. But that's when we're at our absolute best, when we're able to do that.

But sharing the basketball, having multiple guys that can get 20 a night, that really took us to another level.

**Q. What are you looking forward to the most looking forward to tomorrow night?**

BYRON SMITH: Obviously it's big stage thankful to God to be here. But it's the next-team-up, it's the next opportunity. It's still basketball. We just got to go out and continue to execute at a high level. Again, share the basketball, be the hardest playing team, defend and rebound at a high level.

Obviously Lehigh is a very formidable opponent. They're very well-coached. They play well together. They've got guys that can shoot the basketball, got an inside presence. We're really excited about being here and we like our chances to go out and be successful tomorrow night at 6:40.

**Q. You guys played a lot of good teams this year obviously in the SWAC, a lot of good teams and also in the non-conference you had a good schedule. How do you think that sets you up to make a run in the conference tournament but also win here in March?**

BYRON SMITH: I think it helps us. This team has a lot of experience playing together. I think it's our 35th game or 36th game coming up so that gives us a lot of experience playing together.

So playing a tough non-conference schedule with A&M and LSU and Missouri, that really prepares us; obviously, going to the conference and playing obviously some really good teams like Bethune-Cookman, everybody in our conference is really good. On any given night you can be beaten.

The conference championship was wide open. People thought Bethune-Cookman obviously had the best record, but anyone could have won the conference championship, conference tournament championship.

But I think the non-conference and then playing in a tough conference and really helped us for the third season, which is very important to us, so we feel like we're ready to go.

**Q. You mentioned that you completely flipped a roster this year. What kind of guys are you looking for in the portal when you're trying to put a team together that can succeed all season and coming into March?**

BYRON SMITH: Obviously guys with a chip on their shoulder and something to prove. We have a lot of guys that probably weren't the highest recruited guys and some guys that played at the lower level, NAIA, Division II. So we want guys that have chip on their shoulder, that want to come in and be a part of something special, and that's what we were able to do this year.

I'm so proud to be these guys' coach. They've overcome a lot of odds. We have a lot of players that have bounced around to different programs trying to find the right fit and we feel like they've been able to do that here at Prairie View.

Again, just hard playing kids that want to be a part of

something special. That's kind of what we kind of target.

**Q. You were able to play in this game looking back to 2019. Is there something from that experience that you plan to bring to tomorrow night?**

BYRON SMITH: Well, yeah, I think against Fairleigh Dickinson in 2019 we got off to a great first half start. I think we were up 11 at halftime. The second half we kind of got away.

I'm not going to say took our foot off the gas because Fairleigh Dickinson was a very, very formidable team, but we just got away from doing things. So we just have to be consistent and be complete and have a fast start, but be able to sustain it and put together two really, really good halves.

Not get off too fast of a start and then not being able to sustain it. That's kind of the mindset as a coach we're going to talk to the guys about for the game tomorrow night.

**Q. Dontae Horne has had an incredible season, a lot of accolades. What has it been about his game that you've seen to where he's sort of gone to another level?**

BYRON SMITH: Well, first of all, I have to tip my hat to Dontae. He was a young man that kind of recruited us. Obviously he bounced around, went to a few programs, but when he talked to us, he said, hey, Coach, I'm not looking for any NIL money I just want an opportunity to come in and play my last year and help a team win.

That right there got our attention hurry up and get the papers to him to get them signed but if you remember Tai'Reon Joseph got off to a great start. I think he was the third or fourth leading scorer in the nation the first four, five weeks of the season.

So Dontae was kind of in the wings a little bit playing well. He was kind of in the shadows of Tai'Reon Joseph. So Tai'Reon gets an injury and Dontae stepped up in a huge way.

I think not only shooting the basketball but he's becoming a better ball handler. He's able to get the ball to the basket and he's really, really kind of taking his time in being parent and not being in a hurry.

He can score in a multitude of ways. Obviously he shoots the long ball. He can post, he can finish at the rim and he's a really good free-throw shooter. I think he's one of the most impactful transfers anywhere in the country at any

level, not to say that he's the best, but I think he definitely deserves a mention as being one of the transfers at any level of Division I basketball.

**Q. Has there been anything that's surprised you about this team?**

BYRON SMITH: To be honest with you, no. They've said from the very beginning that we're going to be here in the NCAA Tournament. I had my concerns. Obviously when you don't win a game, I had my concerns, like are you guys sure?

They had a quiet confidence about them and if you see them right now they're look willing at me like Coach, why were you worried? I told you we were going to be here.

Nothing has really surprised me. They've got experience. They've got tremendous confidence. They respect the game. Again, I'm just so thankful that we were able to put it together at the right time to be in this press digital us position being here in Dayton and in the First Four.

**Q. This is the first experience for a lot of the guys on the team. How do you go about letting them soak in the experience but also focus on the game?**

BYRON SMITH: Well, just letting them enjoy it, have some fun, obviously take pictures and send videos back to family and things like that. Sometimes at our level this is kind of a once in a lifetime type of an experience. So we definitely want them to enjoy -- this is the fruit of their labor, the hard work we started in July, and now it's March.

So you want them to enjoy it, but at the same time, we continue to impress upon them this is a business trip. We've got a very tough opponent coming up tomorrow night at 6:40, the world will be watching, so we've got to have some time to have some fun, enjoy yourself and relax, but at the same time, we have to be focused on the task at hand.

I think they'll step up and I think they'll be able to handle the moment and be ready to go tomorrow night.

**Q. What was the reaction from the coaches and the team when you guys found out that you'd be playing in the First Four in Dayton?**

BYRON SMITH: Well, we like Dayton. Dayton has got some really good coffee up here, great hotels from the last time I was here. I like it. It's still cold, but other than that, I love Dayton. Once we found out we were coming, everybody was super elated.

I have a great staff, too. I think it's a little bit forgotten, the assistant coaches do a great job of being sometimes the buffer. I can be a bit of a tough coach on these guys, but our assistants really bridge the gap and get these guys to understand that Coach just wants the best for you.

I'm really happy for my assistant coaches that work very hard, some long hours to put us in position to be here.

I've been here as a player. I've been here as an assistant coach when I was at A&M, I've been here as a coach obviously the last time in '19, and I'm excited thankful and blessed to be here again, but just really wanting these other people, the players and the coaching staff, to be able to enjoy the First Four here in Dayton. Really excited about that for them.

**Q. You mentioned your experiences. Do you have a favorite March Madness moment?**

BYRON SMITH: I probably would say a favorite moment -- I guess the favorite moment now is probably to be here. I played in this tournament many, many moons ago. I don't want to give away my age, when I was at the University of Houston. I think I ended up having 18 points. You can always tell the guys who focus on scoring a lot, they always remember exactly what they had.

But I guess that probably was my favorite moment as a player being here and having a pretty good -- even though we did lose to UC Santa Barbara in Knoxville, that probably was my favorite moment, just playing in it and having a pretty good offensive night.

**Q. I asked this to your players: What was your thought seeing the snow when you touched down? More importantly, feeling it when you stepped off the plane.**

BYRON SMITH: I'll tell you what, I probably would have been disappointed if we were here for anything other than the NCAA Tournament, so I was able to process it and say, hey, you know what, you never complain about the seasons because God makes them all.

But just being here. It could be 200 degrees or it could be 2 degrees below zero. We're so happy, so blessed, so thankful to be here that nothing is going to really affect us.

**Q. Obviously Prairie View one of two HBCUs in the tournament how it's playing tonight. What does it mean to you to represent HBCUs on a level like this?**

BYRON SMITH: I think for me, first and foremost, representing my family. My family has been so supportive.

I'm from Louisiana, so they're very, very pleased and very supportive of me being in this journey in coaching.

But representing Prairie View A&M and HBCUs, it's special. We don't always get a ton of attention, obviously. There's other things that go on in college athletics and other programs and things like that, but I'm just thankful to be in a position to be the head coach and to be the leader of young men, to be able to take them to a place that none of them have ever been, so just to see the expression on their faces, just to -- okay, Coach, you told us it's like this and getting to the hotel and you're going to have a bit of a cheering section welcoming you in, all the things we talked about, they're starting to see it now.

It's special. I guess second time as a head coach for me. Grateful, and just really happy for the players, for them to see the look on their faces. That's where I'm getting the most enjoyment of being here in Dayton for the First Four.

**Q. It's been a great ride and playing with a lot of momentum. From this stretch your team has been on, has there been one thing in particular that you've enjoyed most in winning basketball?**

BYRON SMITH: It's just getting these guys to -- I always say this with players: The belief in them comes first, getting these players to believe in you as a plan and as a coach. I think when you can do that, then the buy-in is a lot easier.

But again, just to be with them and to understand now why some of the things that I said to them two months ago, three months ago, six months ago, there was a reason.

So it's just special, again, to be here with them and everything that we talked about. We're not always right as coaches, but I think we do have some experience and been some places that these guys are trying to get to.

So it's just really gratifying for me for the things that we did and how we coached them to bring them along and to then be here and them to say, Coach, glad we listened, glad we did the things you asked us to do.

**Q. I asked this to your guys, but I want to ask you: What do you think the best game that the Panthers played this year?**

BYRON SMITH: I would probably say Bethune-Cookman to be honest with you because obviously the 8 seed, they were the No. 1 seed. They were the big giants, if you will. We just put together a great 40 minutes. We went up -- they obviously made a great run and we were able to sustain consistent play.



So I would say from start to finish, the Bethune-Cookman game, the second round of the SWAC tournament, was probably our best 40 minutes that we've played this entire season.

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