

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Four

Tuesday, March 17, 2026

Dayton, Ohio, USA

UD Arena

**Howard Bison**  
**Coach Kenneth Blakeney**  
**Bryce Harris**  
**Oso Okojie**

Media Conference

Howard 86, UMBC 83

THE MODERATOR: Coach, just a statement on this historic victory.

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Yeah, first I'd like to give praises to my Lord Jesus Christ. Without him, none of this is possible. I am a little bit lost for words. I had to ask Bryce to give the postgame speech because he's a heck of a lot more articulate at this moment and at times always than me.

I really want to compliment UMBC and Coach Ferry and his team. What a wonderful year. They were on a 12-game winning streak. They won the America East regular season conference and won the tournament, and they were resilient and they fought. They did not want to go away all night.

I think our guys' resiliency and being battle tested in our tournament and some of our games this year, it was a very familiar place for us. I'm just so happy for our university, our players. We talk about this moment, these moments when we present our university to our young men.

We talk about how important it is for them to have a chance to get to an NCAA Tournament and win games. It's a box that we checked. We talked about that before the game. We've never won a game. We've done a lot of things in our program, but let's check off the box of winning an NCAA game today.

I'm just so proud of our guys, so proud of our university, so proud of our leadership with Dr. Wayne Frederick and Mr. Kery Davis.



**Q. For both of you, obviously it's exciting to win any tournament game, but when you've done it for the first time ever, can you talk about what that means to you to be able to say that? And Bryce, what was the subject of your postgame talk?**

BRYCE HARRIS: So to answer your first question -- no, I'll let Ose answer your first question. My postgame talk about how last year when both me and Ose were out for the season, and we were out for the season because I ended up breaking my foot and he ended up getting a concussion against who? UMBC, at UMBC.

It's a full-circle moment, how like you're playing your first NCAA Tournament -- one of your first NCAA Tournament games against a team that you got hurt against, you know what I mean? And they fought their butt off. Like they are such a talented team.

I feel like we would get to the point where we'd kind of get to push away, and they wouldn't go away. Their guys are so solid and a lot of them know their role and they do it at the highest level. All credit to them.

But that's what it was basically about. Everyone kind of came in and played their part, which was huge.

OSE OKOJIE: Yeah, it's kind of surreal. You kind of watched this tournament as a kid, and you're like, I always imagined I'd be here, but to win a game is crazy. I'm truly blessed. Like Coach said, all glory goes to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

Really, I feel more happy for the younger guys. I feel like for me, the reason I play so hard, I don't want to get too emotional here, but the reason I play so hard is because of the younger guys on our team, like the freshmen, the sophomores, juniors.

I play so hard for them because I had such great role models in this game. I had such great role models like Jelani Williams, Seth Towns, Steve Settle, Jordan Wood, Elijah Hawkins, Kobe Dickson, Marcus Dockery, Talin Lewis and Thomas Weaver right now are coaches.

I can go down the list. Isiah Warfield, Jordan Hairston. I name all those guys off just to truly say, they inspired me to

be a better man and a better basketball player every single day and that's what I try to go into games with and go into practice with for the younger guys to be inspiration.

At the end of the day the ball is going to stop bouncing one day, but it's how you make people feel and the impact you have on them. That's what I want to leave, a lasting impact on these guys, because my OGs left a great impact on me and I love those guys to death.

Every time I have a tough game or anything like that, it's funny, I always look at the young guys on the end of the bench, and I'm like, I've got to keep going. I can't falter because they're counting on me just like I counted on my seniors and OGs back in the day.

To answer your second question, Bryce basically gave his flowers to everyone. We had everyone from top to bottom, Cam Gillus, Alex Cotton, and Cedric Taylor, Isaiah Brown, Trevelle Bryson, Danas. Everyone came in and impacted in some way. It was just like the camaraderie and that brotherhood. We have that -- probably the most connected I've been with a team in a while.

Like these guys are my brothers, and everyone knew their job, and like Coach and Bryce said, all credit to UMBC because they're a hell of a basketball program, top to bottom.

But Bryce's NBA speech was just like, we did it. We made history with these guys. And it wasn't just me. It wasn't just the starting five. It was 1 to 16. The energy they gave up is the coaching staff, shout out tomorrow's weaver for the scout.

But honestly, truly a blessing.

**Q. You worked so hard to build a big lead. They get it down to five. You withstand that challenge and extend it back out. For them to go on that final run and get within two, describe what was moment was like, describe what the conversations were like amongst you guys to find a way to pull through in those final seconds?**

OSE OKOJIE: Essentially, it was just us being connected. That's the biggest thing. We've been in games like this before. If you guys check our rap sheet we've been in games like this before. We've been in situations. We've practiced for these situations every single day 7:00 a.m.

We know what came with it, and it wasn't like we were worried or anything like that because at this big stage there's no time for fear. There's no time for worry. You've got to trust your work.

And we have a hell of a coach that made us trust our work even more, so we trusted the game plan and trusted each other mostly.

The five guys out there, you've got to be one unit connected all the time. Those are really the conversations.

BRYCE HARRIS: I'll just say, for me, I said this at the MEAC tournament, the fans and everything, just like overreaction to everything -- not overreaction, but there's a reaction to everything.

But it's kind of like, just calm down. It's a basketball game. And also, too, they just did -- we've got to give all glory to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

I've got to give it to God, I said at the MEAC tournament, anytime I felt any bit of anxiety, any bit of nervousness I felt a voice in the back of my head and I felt like it was God telling me, trust me, trust me, trust me, and making sure I don't falter in that faith. Because you falter in that faith, that's when things start to teeter. That's when your emotions start to get out of balance.

When it gets to circumstances like this when the stage is so big, you can't try and process all these emotions, especially a game that you worked so hard for. You've got to give those emotions to him and kind of handle what you can handle.

**Q. Ose, I think you played the last 12 and a half minutes with more fouls than maybe the whole game. What was your strategy to stay in the game and impact?**

OSE OKOJIE: Just discipline and trust in myself. I wholeheartedly believe I am one of the best defenders in the country, and he always emphasizes that to me every time, even though I get in myself -- you get frustrated at times, but bringing myself back down to reality, calming my nerves, and just knowing the game needs me.

My teammates need me. The younger guys need me. So to be solid and play those 12 minutes with not fouling is discipline, truly discipline, and trusting in my abilities.

**Q. I've got a two-part game plan question. You talked about the game plan. What was your game plan against UMBC in terms of what did you want to take away, and then two now with the win, any idea of a game plan against Michigan?**

BRYCE HARRIS: I'm going to be honest, it was just play like us. You know what I mean? We obviously watched

film, we studied their tendencies, things of that nature, but the main thing was don't come into this game and start getting out of character.

We're not going to change who we are. We know what we're good at, and you just embrace it, you know what I mean? From 1 to 16, whatever your job is, you do your job.

We understand that. Like coming into the game, like, we're a team that applies pressure, so we're not going to change that. What are we changing that for? We won a MEAC conference championship with that, so there's no need to falter in that.

Shout out to Coach KD just pushing that theme of urgency with us. We came out and we did that. We came out and we did it.

OSE OKOJIE: I couldn't have said it better myself. Literally, our game plan was just to be us. One of the main things, too, Coach said is we're a physical team, so keep that physicality up the whole way. Don't run from it. Just attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack. One thing we always preach is never be on our heels. Always, always, always go after it.

We always say no matter where we're at, whether it's the MEAC tournament, whether it's the first game of the season, we haven't won nothing yet. We've got to go out there and attack every single time because nothing in this life is promised, so you've got to go out there and attack it with everything you've got.

With the 16 brothers we got, I feel very confident attacking anything.

**Q. Coach, would you like to answer that question from the gentleman talking about preparation?**

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Yes, going into the game, we knew they were a very potent offensive team, and watching what I could watch throughout the 48 hours that we found out that we were going to play them until basically time to tip off, they are a really dangerous three-point shooting team.

So we wanted to try to limit their three-point shooting. I don't know if we did a great job of that, and looking right now, they were 9 of 22, which is a fairly really good percentage.

But they averaged eight for the year, so we didn't do bad. And we had some, I thought, miscommunications in the first half where we gave up probably three open

three-pointers, either through miscommunication or in transition.

So I think we defended the three-point pretty well.

That was one thing. Then their transition. They're a team that really, really gets down the court fast. So for us to be able to sprint, point, and talk, things that we talk about that are inbred into our culture in transition and build our wall, I thought we did a really good job of that and trying to limit them in fast break points.

When you look at it on the stat sheet, they had five fast break points, so we did a really good job eliminating that in transition.

**Q. Is there a more helpless feeling for a coach, that you work that hard to get a lead and in the last minute or so the free throws just don't drop? What's going through your mind there as that comes into play?**

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Run, clock, run. I mean, that's the only thing. For me, it was like, thinking about game situations, and we went from, I want to say, a three-possession game to a two-possession game to a one-possession game. And I'm thinking, inbounds, plays, how to get it in. Who do we try to orchestrate getting into that we feel confident can step up to the line and get a free throw.

There's so many -- defense, how do we slow them down so they don't get a quick two. There's so many different thoughts going through your head at that point in time. But I trust our guys. We don't do a lot. It's almost like -- you ever see that guy that intentionally sits in the mirror and messes up his hair, does his hair in a messy way because he wants it to look messy for like 30 minutes?

That's a little bit how we are. We give all our guys all the answers. We play motion. We don't run a lot of sets. We understand spacing. We understand how to move.

We talk about having great ball movement and body movement. The reason I say, like, the guy that sits in front of the mirror and messes up his hair for 30 minutes, that's what we do. When people see us, they go, you don't run anything. I go, but we practice this every single day where our guys are given the answers to every solution that they are presented.

Even in the press break situations as it's coming down, we didn't have to change our formation, they have all the information. It's just up to them to execute and them to do it with one another.

**Q. You mentioned the boxes to check. You talked about where the program was when you began. Where was this box? How did you view this particular one, not knowing you could emphasize it until you get here but now that you've actually accomplished it?**

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Well, I think when we took over the job, I want to say Howard was, for like the last 20 years, the 354th ranked team in the country. So for me, that was great because there was nothing else to do but go forward and make this team better and this program a better program.

We talked about, like, we'd like to become a winner. We'd like to become a contender. We'd like to become a champion. We'd like to become, at that point, the most dominant team in the league. As we kind of checked off some of those boxes, obviously advancing in the NCAA Tournament was one of those boxes, as well.

I believe that Howard has a brand that is globally recognized, and what has been done on the academic side with so many wonderful alums going out in the world and contributing so much, I really feel that we can replicate that success on the basketball court.

We've been grinding at it kind of unseen, and we've had opportunities in different places to kind of showcase our basketball talent, if it's the NBA All-Star Game, if it's the Michael B. Jordan Classic, if it's the HBCU Classic, whatever those moments are.

But being on this stage and being able to check those boxes, it's the only game going on right now, and the whole college basketball world I'm pretty sure was locked in on it. What a wonderful accomplishment.

But like I said earlier, I'm so much happier for our leadership, our university, our leadership Mr. Kery Davis, our president Dr. Wayne Frederick, our young men. Because when I went to Duke, I understood what going to Duke meant. I went to Duke to win championships.

I want our young men to come to Howard to win championships because I'm having opportunities from 1991 and 1992 at the age of 54 that are still present and presenting themselves daily that being a part of -- small part, a very small part of a wonderful basketball program that happened to have won two National Championships back to back years, and I understood that, so when I present opportunities to our players, it's about how do you brand market and separate yourself from other students at Howard.

You do it in the classroom. You do it in the community,

and you do it on the court. But if you have a chance to win a, MEAC conference championship, regular season championship or an NCAA game and advance, there is not going to be an alum in the country that won't take your phone call.

You come to Howard for reasons to try to position yourself for the next 30 to 40 to 50 years of your life and hopefully with our guys, they're doing that today.

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