

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Four

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Dayton, Ohio, USA

UD Arena

## Prairie View A&M Panthers Coach Byron Smith Cory Wells

## Dontae Horne

Media Conference

Prairie View A&M 67, Lehigh 55

BYRON SMITH: Appreciate everybody being here. Super excited. Big win for us. Like you said, the first time Prairie View has gotten a win in the NCAA Tournament, so definitely gratifying. A heck of a basketball game. I think the fans that tuned in were definitely entertained. We're definitely excited to survive and advance and move on to the first round on Friday night.

**Q. The way you closed the season tournament run in terms of the SWAC tournament and now NCAA First Four victory, talk a little bit about how things came together to complete that run that you're on now.**

DONTAE HORNE: Like I stated in the other interviews, we came out with a defensive mindset and we've just been riding that train ever since.

CORY WELLS: Definitely. We knew we had the talent the whole time. It was about putting it together and peaking at the right time. You want to be playing your best ball in March. You don't want to be playing your best ball early in the season and then fall off. So we did that.

**Q. You guys mentioned the steals already and you were terrorizing their bigs. Was that something you knew you could take advantage of against Lehigh?**

CORY WELLS: We knew we had the quickness and the athleticism to be able to stunt and double. They had a little size advantage, so we just tried to play the game. They were grabbing a lot, so we threw two at them and tried to fly around a little bit just to disrupt them.

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, we were trying to disrupt them.



We knew we had the quickness and athleticism. We were just digging in and digging in and helping our bigs because we knew we were undersized. Like he said, we just had to help.

**Q. For both you guys, what went into the defense on Whitlock. Really struggled all night. I don't think he had a field goal in the first half.**

DONTAE HORNE: We had to shout out to Lance Williams, our pit bull. He came in -- Lance don't care about stats, he don't care about scoring. He just came in and did his job, and he did his job tonight. He's averaging 21, so that says a lot about Lance's defense.

CORY WELLS: Yes, definitely Lance is the engine that makes us run, him and Corey Dunning defensively, and we go as they go. He came out, set the tone, and we followed his lead.

**Q. Last April did you watch Florida win the National Championship, and at that moment in your wildest dreams, could you have imagined that one year later you'd be getting ready to play them in the NCAA Tournament?**

CORY WELLS: Not all, to be honest with you. Not at all. As basketball players you watch every NCAA Tournament. And just to think that you're here now and you'll be playing the team who just won last year, it's in the back of your mind. But we're going to go out there and compete regardless.

DONTAE HORNE: Yeah, same. I would have never thought I'd be playing Florida. I would have never thought I'd be in March, but we're here now, so it's like, keep going.

**Q. Dontae, Coach mentioned yesterday how you almost had to recruit them to take you. If you think about where you were a year ago and where you are now, what does this mean to you? What's changed in your life?**

DONTAE HORNE: This means a lot. Coming into the summer when I hit the portal, a lot of people fell out because of my current grades, so I was kind of down and depressed. But being able to have a school that had faith

in me means a lot to me because if they didn't have faith in me, I wouldn't be the player I am right now, and I wouldn't be here today.

**Q. Coach, you've been here before, literally, weren't able to get the victory. It's been a while, but was it anything that you did on the first time that you used this time as you went into it to be maybe a little more prepared than the first time?**

BYRON SMITH: I think the first time we were here in 2019, we got off to a great start. I think we were up by 11 on Fairleigh Dickinson at halftime, but we didn't finish. Obviously you always want to get off to a fast start, but the main thing was to finish, and I think we did that. I think we defended. We flew around.

We caused a lot of problems with our quickness, our athleticism against Lehigh. Well-coached team. They've got good players, and it was no accident that they were here. I think we just obviously focused on the defensive side of it. We swarmed them. We swiped at the basketball. We took away their high-low action. Everything they wanted to do, we pretty much had an answer for it, and it paid off tonight getting the victory.

**Q. This is the first time in 32 years that three HBCUs have made the tournament, and now you join Howard and Tennessee State in the first round. What does this moment mean for HBCU basketball as a whole?**

BYRON SMITH: For any program it means a lot when you can win in the NCAA Tournament, but obviously we are an HBCU. Just a proud moment. My biggest thing is hey, I've been around the block a little bit as I told you guys the other day, being in the NCAA tournament as a player as an assistant coach and obviously as a head coach.

But for me, to see these young men, the look on their face, the excitement, kind of a dream come true, because everybody grows up watching this tournament wanting to be a part of it. I'm just glad I was able to be here with them and share this moment with them because it's definitely a happy time at Prairie View for sure.

**Q. A little bit along that same line, when you've been around the block, like you said, and you can do something for the first time ever, how special, extra layer of special is that?**

BYRON SMITH: It's really special. It kind of reminds me when I got married. That was the first time I did that, too, but it didn't work out too good. No, just joking.

Exciting. I mean, obviously, to move on to the first round,

it's exciting.

I just think this is -- for all young people, anything is possible. With hard work and perseverance and having some thick skin, good things can happen. I tell our kids all the time when you live right, you do the right things, you become an everyday guy, good things are going to happen for you. I'm just glad because kids sometimes, they doubt, and they don't have success right away. They kind of splinter a little bit and kind of go south and they stop listening a little bit.

And we had some ups and downs in our regular season, but this group was very resilient, and I'm so thankful they continued to listen.

I think I told you guys yesterday that the believing is first with these young people, so if they believe in their coaches, the buy-in is a lot easier. I think they believed in the coaching staff. I think they trusted us and obviously what we were preaching and selling to them every day, they hung on to it. Now you see in the final hours, it's paying off.

**Q. You guys won five games last year. To make this rise, I know there's a lot of new players and some of them were up there with you, what's gone into this and how gratifying is it to turn this thing around?**

BYRON SMITH: I mean, losing sucks. At the end of the day, you just don't want to -- everything is just better when you win, obviously. Life is better.

You know, I think everybody would like to be Coach Saban, right, and just seven, eight National Championships and be No. 1 preseason and in the final poll every year. But that's just not realistic. I think when you have seasons like we did the last two years, I think it really tests you as a coach and how much you really want to be doing this thing.

I dug deep, prayed a lot. Support of my family has been really, really good, and we just put our head down and went to work. We felt really good about the kids that we brought in, that they kind of had a chip on their shoulder. Kind of the least, last and the left out, the group that we brought in. But when you bring people in that have been doubted, and if they come together and they work together, great things can happen. Definitely been some trying times here at Prairie View, but it looks like we're on the other side of that now and we're definitely thankful.

**Q. I know it's early and you've got to get to work. Do you see yourself changing the game plan much from tonight since you were so successful, or is it something you've got to work out a little bit later?**



BYRON SMITH: We definitely have to tweak some things. They've got a 6'11" monster down in Gainesville by the name of Rueben Chinyelu, and they've got probably four or five guys that are going to be playing on TNT or ESPN here in probably another eight, nine months. We've definitely got to figure out some things.

They've obviously got one of the top young coaches in the country in Todd Golden. He's a well-respected guy, does a great job. But in life, no test, no testimony, so we're going to be tested going into Tampa.

But we look forward to it.

**Q. A little bit along that same line, as special as this moment is, how long do you get to savor and enjoy it before you start thinking about what you're up against now? The rhythm of what's next --**

BYRON SMITH: I forgot, what happened? Did we just win a game? That's how quickly you have to move on. You're already thinking about this deal right here. That's already in my mind what can we do against a machine like that. But we will show up and put our best foot forward, and we'll see where we are. But obviously I'm going to try to enjoy it with our players tonight.

Our esteemed AD here who's kind of escorting me tonight. It makes me feel special when your boss walks in with you, Anton Goff. So I'm excited that he's here. But we're going to do the best we can and just try to keep this thing moving.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.

