

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Howard vs Michigan

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Howard Bison

Coach Kenneth Blakeney

Bryce Harris

Ose Okojie

Media Conference

Michigan 101, Howard 80

KENNETH BLAKENEY: First I'd like to give thanks to my Lord, Jesus Christ, my savior. With Him, everything is possible.

I just want to talk about my guys. These are two four-year guys that are sitting beside me. One is a five-year guy. In the modern world of NIL and transfer portal, these two guys have been the foundation of Howard basketball for the last five years.

In the last five years, our program has had more success during that period because of these two guys and what they've done, and certainly players before, but I want to honor and really thank these two guys for their contribution to the university, to our program, and to the D.C. community.

I can't express how grateful I am for these guys. For Bryce and Ose, they have been unbelievable people, unbelievable people, people that I would do anything for. Just great young men. Great young men.

I'm so proud of these guys, and I love them so much.

Q. Talk about what worked in the first half for you guys, and talk about the experience in general being here in the tournament and how that made you feel even in the loss today.

BRYCE HARRIS: I'll go first. I feel like just playing loose, like a lot of people come in with a lot of expectations, and you have the bright lights and everything like that. You



don't want to come in playing timid. You want to leave everything out there on the table. I feel like that was a big thing for us. And also making sure we stayed connected despite all the distractions outside of just the game.

The experience has been great. It's my third time being in March Madness, and it's been an exceptional experience ever since my first one. I've been through all parts of -- all different types of experiences, my first March Madness, didn't have much of -- I had a role but I didn't have as big of a role, and coming in the second year having an even bigger role and then this year having an even bigger role, kind of seeing it from all perspectives.

I feel like the biggest thing that changed for me was once you get more responsibility, taking everybody with you. Even the young guys, understanding like, oh, okay, this is what -- at the time, he's a fifth-year senior, this is what Jelani Williams meant, this is what Seth Towns meant, trying to instill culture in the time of NIL when you're going to get a whole new team every year.

But the guys did a great job of just buying in. It's been a pleasure working with my guy Ose here. Just continuing to carry the torch and understand like, okay, there's a standard at this university now, so for the younger guys you've got to continue that standard.

OSE OKOJIE: I would say for us, kind of what Bryce said, staying loose in the first half and trusting each other and being connected. A lot of the times people go into these games and just looking at the name on the jersey instead of recognizing they're human just like me. They play ball just like me. Whatever route they took to get to where they're at, we're at the same place right now.

We realize that, like, just to go in, no fear, like I said before -- like fear, I believe in God, so fear is not from the Lord, so it's to go in -- even with ups and downs, bumps and bruises, no matter what, stay solid.

The experience has been a blessing, truly and honestly. I don't know, even playing with Bryce for four years, being here, seeing the growth, being a senior now and kind of like sharing that wisdom I have to make school history to have a big game, I always say a prayer before the game and just ask God to give me the guidance and the strength.



You know what I mean? I don't know, I feel like 12-year-old me is real happy and proud with where I'm at today.

It's tough -- damn, I didn't want to cry, but it's tough because that connection that you have with your brothers, from 7:00 a.m. to workouts, from the calf to extra, extra, extra shooting, all that, to be able to wake up every day, even though you're not having the best day, but I had 15 brothers who were always excited to see me and would give me the most love and joy. That's why I kept fighting. That's why I kept playing so hard.

It's kind of like Bryce said. Man, I can't say enough about this guy. Both these guys, Coach and Bryce, I'm going to say it again with tears on my face, Bryce Harris should be in the rafters at Howard University, no ifs, ands or buts about that. But my experience, I'm just blessed to be here. A lot of kids don't get to be here. I'm just happy to be here.

Q. I don't know how to follow that up, but for Bryce, after hitting that shot a couple nights ago and then to get your first win in a tournament setting and then to -- Michigan coach was up here saying, they threw a haymaker at us in the first half. What does that mean to you personally, to know that you guys didn't wilt in this spotlight?

BRYCE HARRIS: For me, it's huge. It's huge because that's the main thing we preach every day. Even with our conference, we would have success in our conference, we'd always make a joke -- Coach doesn't know this, but we would come in at 7 o'clock in the morning and be all tense because at the time I think we might have been like 9-3 or something like that, we just got No. 1 in our conference and we'd all kind of be in the locker room and be like, all right, it's time for film. It's time to be 0-19 again. Because Coach is going to constantly challenge us.

But that pressure, we like to call it healthy pressure, that translated to this level. Even going back to the MEAC tournament, even when other teams threw their best blow, we've been through worse. We know how to handle the situation.

Big shout-out to Michigan; they're a great team. It could have been very easy for them to -- like other past teams that have been upset to totally dismantle, and I heard from the back room, just to see Coach said that they have leadership at halftime, like kudos to them. That's the sign of a good team.

Like Michigan is a great team, but we didn't come in thinking that, oh, we're just going to get steamrolled.

That's not why you play the game. You play the game to win. We're just as talented as they are. We have talent, too. I feel like we showed that in the first half for sure.

Q. What did Michigan do to pull away there in that second half after it was close?

BRYCE HARRIS: Like I said before, they're a really talented team. Good teams, they found a way. Kudos to them. We did not change anything about us. We just remained the same team that we have been all year. We didn't waver. We didn't falter.

Q. How has the Howard culture and Coach Blakeney's mentorship helped mold you into the men that you are now?

OSE OKOJIE: I can go. I think it is -- I'm at a loss for words trying to really fathom, but I think the Howard culture and especially Coach Blakeney's culture has just changed my life view drastically for the better. Like changed my life view drastically for the better. I'll say that again. Because especially me being from Canada, I always say, I didn't know anything about HBCUs except that I had a cousin that went to Howard and she was studying nursing.

But to come there and to see so many people like me -- I didn't even know if there was going to be Canadians or African, because I'm African, so many people, like Bryce kind of said, embraced me. I just felt that love from everyone, no matter if it was a Howard alum that was 80 years old or just a little kid that went to the Howard middle school.

It was just so much love and so much appreciation. Even when you'd be walking on campus, even days you don't feel the best -- everyone has their life problems, everyone has their ups and downs, but to feel love from an institution, just being somewhere so constantly is a beautiful thing, and I praise God for that.

Coach Blake, I can't even explain how much of an impact he's had on my life. I would say one of the biggest things as a basketball player and young man, you always go into basketball and you're like, I want to score this many points, I want to break these many records, so on and so forth.

But no one in my life has ever put winning -- on the court has put winning in the aspect of what winning on the court can do for you in life, and he has always preached that.

I tell my little sister and my little brother all the time, like he always preached about his success on the court and he's still eating off that today. You know what I mean? I always go into everything with the utmost effort and the utmost



intensity because the stuff he teaches like hunting -- that's our culture, hunting. You can hunt on the court, you can hunt off the court. If I've got an exam at 3:40 at Locke Hall, I've got to hunt on that exam. You just pick and choose where you've got to hunt.

But the life lessons I've learned from this man has been a true blessing to just be his young leader on the court and just to be that echo of his message. I can't say it enough, too. My parents -- I always talk to my parents and they would be like, how's Coach, how's Coach? I'm like, yeah, he's good. He's KB. I would say he's KB, but they know what that means.

My dad always texted me and everything like that because I understand that he puts so much effort and love into us, and a lot of -- I've been around the game a lot, Bryce -- he can speak for himself, but I know a lot of coaches that at some point, even with some players, even if it's the last man on the bench, they'll brush them off.

This man, from 1 to 16, no matter who you are, if you're going through something, school, basketball, he will sit you down, talk to you not as an expense, not as a commodity, as a human being.

In this day and age, especially for us as young Black men, some people don't look at us as human beings like that. This man makes sure we're seen, heard and loved. I can't say enough about him. I love him to death, truly.

BRYCE HARRIS: I'm going to be honest, the lessons I've learned from Coach, and I grew up in a great family, had a lot of beautiful souls that I've come across, great mature Black men that I can look up to as role models, but I can say there's never been a time where I've seen somebody, and I'll just call it urgent. I've never seen somebody so aggressive with the standard of how they live their life; you know what I mean?

Just understanding -- naturally as human beings, when we want to pursue certain things, because our mind is scared of rejection and things of that nature, we automatically put limitations on ourselves, whether it's inadvertently or not. Your fear will sometimes hinder you from, oh, might skip this workout today, I don't need to call this guy today, I'll do it tomorrow.

KB doesn't have that. He doesn't have that. I've never met somebody that's looked like me, that's grabbed life by the horns, grabbed the bull by the horns and said, no, I deserve this. Like, I deserve this, and I'm not going to cheat the process to get it. I'm going to go through every rough patch. I'm going to go through hell and high water, I'm going to go through the valley and I'm going to get to

the other side, and I'm going to earn it.

He instills that in people around him because if you're not on that type of timing, it's bye. He has no time for -- granted, yes, people fail; it happens. That's the road to success. But there's no time for you to feel bad for yourself; know what I mean? At the end of the day, God willing, you're going to wake up the next day and you've got to do it all over again. So I may be long-winded, but that's about it.

Seeing a role model like that, that's something that not only I can instill in my profession, my basketball career, I can instill that into my kids, and that's something that's so grateful that I can be like, okay, this is a gem that was given to me, and families and generations way when I'm long gone are going to continue to carry that.

Q. As well as your team played this week, do you think HBCUs can finally stop getting First Four games? What do you think should be done, and do you think you've done enough?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Thank you for the question. Honestly, I really want to say -- I understand the question. But to make it to the tournament is such a special thing, and however you get here, if it's playing in a First Four, if you go right to the tournament, man, like, this is the NCAA Tournament, and this is what little kids across the world dream about watching.

Putting myself in my two-year-old, my four-year old self watching the NCAA Tournament and just dreaming of one day playing there. However you can get here is awesome. It's amazing, and it's a blessing.

Q. You talked yesterday about the pride in being here and representing Howard. You've been on a lot of big stages yourself personally. Do you allow yourself at any point tonight or yesterday to sort of step back from the moment and take it into account how important it was for you and the university?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: It's really challenging for me to process stuff, and it takes a while. I've been trying to remove myself from the intensity of what just happened out there, and I can't right now because it's such a -- it's just how I'm wired. It's just my DNA.

I love competing. There's nothing outside of my family and these young men that I am so blessed and honored to mentor and to coach and to teach, I'm wired to compete, like, 24 hours a day. Naomi and I were playing soccer last night, and I'm competing as much as I can. Like, I just am wired to compete.



It's hard for me to turn it off. It really is. But I do with my family that has been so supportive and so great. My wife, Tracey, my daughter, Naomi. That's kind of how I turn it off, I guess.

Q. The scoreboard might have said one thing, but after what you just heard your student-athletes say up on this podium, how much of a winner do you feel like today, and what advice would you give young coaches who want to be like you? What message would you give them?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: I am so lucky to work with the 16 young men that we have. I've been saying all along how they have incredible character. Their families are super, super families that have raised their kids in the right way.

There's not a moment when I lay my head down at night that I'm concerned or worried about anything. Those guys averaged a 3.4 in the classroom. As I mentioned before, we do more community service and more social justice work in the community than any program in the country, hands down. It's not even close. And more impactful.

They are ambassadors and champions on campus, and they have done a wonderful job for this program, for this university. We've won more games or tied the record for more games than any team in the history of the program. These young men have gone to three NCAA tournaments out of four years, which means we've won the tournament three years out of four. We've won two regular season championships in that span. I can't say enough for them.

And for the question about what would I tell young coaches? Be patient and do it the right way.

Q. After picking up your first NCAA Tournament win ever, a few days back and then staying wire to wire with Michigan the whole game, what can you say about the direction this group is headed in?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Well, I mean, I want to say this. I can't accept a consolation win. I don't want this to be, like, hey, you guys played well for X amount of minutes. Like, we lost. For me, that's -- we've got to get better. We've got to get better.

I don't want to -- like, we need to win these games.

I say that from not -- just that's again, how I'm wired. We need to win, and we need to continue to win, and we need to continue to advance.

So I appreciate the question and I'm so grateful for you for

the question, but I don't want to accept consolation victories, not when I know that our brand can be one of these brands that are playing deep into March and hopefully in April. So thank you for the question.

Q. What is it that motivates you and keeps you wanting to come back and work with the young people, work with our kids and continue to strive?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: What motivates me to keep me energized to work with young people is that I've been very lucky to work at Harvard. I've been very lucky to work at Columbia. I attended Duke University. When I walk on the campus of Howard University, I see young Black, young Brown men and women that are striving to be not good, they're striving to be great. They inspire me every single day.

We have young people that are trying to be the next Thurgood Marshall, the next Kamala Harris, the next Andrew Young, the next Chadwick Boseman. You can go down the list of people, and you see young people that are going to be the next movers and shakers in our world. That gives me chill bumps talking about that and thinking about that.

I have a young daughter that -- I want her to see that. I want her here on the podium with me. I want her in press conferences. I want our young people to be in rooms that they haven't been in before and to think outside of the box like they haven't thought before. That's why we call our program the Dream Factory, because if you can dream it, it can be done. It can be accomplished on the campus of Howard University.

I'm just grateful for our leadership, Mr. Kery Davis, our president, Dr. Wayne Frederick, that have allowed me to kind of be me.

Q. What did Michigan do in the second half that made things so challenging, and care to talk about Cam Gillus and Cedric Taylor's performance?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Absolutely, and I didn't do this at the start because I wanted to acknowledge and talk about our young men. But Coach Dusty May and Michigan, they are fabulous, absolutely fabulous. I watched them in person in D.C., and I was just so amazed at how well they played and how talented they are.

He's a terrific coach, and they have some great players. They do a great job of really spacing you out.

If it's their pick-and-roll or their ability to get inside the gaps and with their spacing and their ability to shoot, play from



those different angles, they do a terrific job. They're very talented.

I felt like they -- I know they have like seven or eight threes at halftime, but it felt like they had about 12. It just felt like we could not stop them from shooting.

Then with their versatility from the perimeter but also the way they're so diverse with their height inside, they do a really good job of having great balance at the rim and on the three-point line.

Q. It's kind of a two-pronged question. What does Howard mean to you, and what do you and your staff need to do to take that next step to make that little deeper run in March?

KENNETH BLAKENEY: Yeah, Howard has changed my life. There's probably been certain things that have gone along my journey that have changed my life. Certainly my mom in terms of her being a parent, especially in an urban area where you have the ability to go one way or another. I'd say DeMatha Catholic High School and the love and support that they've gave me. Duke University, again, Coach K with the love and support in my experience there.

There's been some other points along the road, but outside of my family and my wife and my daughter, Howard means everything to me, man. It completely changed my life. It is a life changer.

I have a very unique path. I wasn't a coach for eight, nine years. I was out of the business. I was completely doing something unrelated to being on the sidelines. When I came back, I was a volunteer at Columbia University.

Mr. Davis called me up, sent me a text that I'll never forget on a Sunday. I was living on 125th right across the street from Dinosaur Barbecue in Harlem, and I saw his text, and he said, would you be interested -- I'm trying to remember the exact words, but would you be interested in having a conversation about Howard. I'm paraphrasing. And it scared me. I didn't tell my wife for a couple hours about the text because at that point in time, my mind had already figured out everything I needed to do to make Howard a winner.

I had a very great life in New York. My wife, my daughter, they both had their communities. Working at Columbia was really cool, living in New York, the whole bit. But it was the vision that I had at Columbia and the vision that Mr. Davis had -- sorry, at Howard, and the vision that Mr. Davis had for Howard, it was just a great partnership.

So I owe Howard everything. I don't belittle that at all.

Everything. What a wonderful, wonderful place with some incredible people. So I'm very grateful.

I told Naomi, she's a soccer player, and she's like on the path of probably being an Olympian, a pro, the whole bit. I was like, regardless of what you do, Howard will be in your top five. 100 percent.

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