

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Iowa vs Clemson

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

**Iowa Hawkeyes**

**Coach Ben McCollum**

**Bennett Stirtz**

**Cam Manyawu**

Media Conference

**Q. For both of you guys, NCAA Tournament, great success at Northwest Missouri State. What's this atmosphere like and how does it differ, if at all?**

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I guess we'll find out when we get out there. But it's just super exciting and just taking it all in and excited for this open practice and excited for tomorrow.

CAM MANYAWU: Yeah, I'd say it's just a different type of adrenaline rush that you kind of get. You just feel how big of a game it is, and it's something you've grown up watching your entire life. To be here last year once and now to be here again, it's just a blessing, and we're just going to go out there and enjoy every moment of it and try to play as hard as we can and try and win as many games as possible.

They play at a slower pace and they like to get into the paint and play through their bigger guys. So just making sure that we're ready to go defensively and taking away some of the things they like to do. And then offensively executing the scout and being ready to go from the start will help us a lot.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, they're super well-coached and they play the right way. We're going to have our hands full, and we've got to be ready to go. It'll be a good one.

**Q. Bennett, as far as Clemson, if you could just elaborate a little bit more, what do you think their strengths are and the biggest challenges they might present to you guys?**



BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, their guards can get downhill pretty much at will, and we're going to need to stop that. And then they're also pretty good passers as well. If we can limit that, that would help us out a lot. And then their bigs can stretch out and shoot, some of them can, and then they're really physical down low. They're kind of all balanced, and they've got strengths in a lot of different aspects.

**Q. Coach, I know you as a coach are no stranger to playing in tournaments, but what do you think the guys who are on Drake's squad last year learned and took lessons away from approaching this tournament mentally, physically, whatever it may be, that you want to apply to this tournament?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think we've got a lot of guys that have played in postseason, so they understand some of the preparation that goes into it. You also have to make sure that you don't overthink it to where you make it something bigger than it actually is.

It's not necessarily just another game, but it is in a sense, with a little bit of win or go home to it.

Our guys have been through that. They understand what's at stake. They understand the preparation. They've prepared well. Hopefully we can show that tomorrow.

**Q. What have you seen from Clemson? What is the challenge they're going to present you from your offensive perspective?**

BEN McCOLLUM: From us scoring? Yeah, defensively they're really physical. They do a good job of guarding the basketball, do a good job with their hands. I think they're really well-coached. They'll have a plan. They've got great plans defensively, good scouting. Just everything that a good basketball team has, they have.

We'll have our hands full in regards to being able to score, and then obviously we'll have our hands full in regards to being able to defend them. I think it all goes back to they're just very disciplined, very physical on both sides of the ball.

**Q. I know obviously a big part of this season has been**



**you bringing along a group of Drake guys with you and what you guys did last year in the NCAA Tournament. How do you think just having this group that you already had this experience with will bode well this time around?**

BEN McCOLLUM: I think the experience again probably gives you just an understanding of the preparation that goes into it, the atmosphere that's with it. I think those guys have seen that. They've seen it in a couple different games. Again, if they can carry some of that experience with them -- but it doesn't give you -- I wish the experience would give us plus 10. It doesn't do that. The game actually still starts 0-0. So you use some of that experience to gain some comfort, but it doesn't necessarily give you that much of an advantage in the game once it starts.

**Q. Them not having Welling going down in the ACC Tournament, I know there was a big difference when you played Ohio State when they had Tilly versus when they didn't. How different is it for you in preparation when they don't have one of their more important players, one of their bigger guys in the front court?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think he's so different from Tilly. Tilly was such an offensive trigger. It wasn't that Tilly scored. That wasn't the issue. It was that he could execute their drop coverage. And then offensively he can get to next actions a lot quicker, so it made it more difficult to defend. But it wasn't necessarily his scoring prowess.

I think Welling is a little bit unique in that respect where it's not quite Tilly. Obviously they would love to have him and he's a good basketball player. I think he takes a little paint pressure away from them. Maybe it makes them better defensively, I don't know. They would probably know better than I would.

But it certainly doesn't help them. I think it's a lot different than losing Tilly. Not necessarily in importance, but just in what Tilly does versus what Welling does is a little bit different. Welling can really score in the post and do some things like that.

Tilly can make it down there. That's not really his strength. His strength is triggering offense, getting to the next action, so a little different players.

**Q. In your first year with Iowa, what have you learned about yourself as a head coach and maybe even something that will be beneficial in this opening weekend of the tournament?**

BEN McCOLLUM: You know, it's hard to reflect in season. I don't know that I learned necessarily much about myself as a head coach. I think I learned a lot about this level, meaning I think this level is a little bit unique from every level that I've been at.

It's not better, not worse. Division II is different, mid major is different, and high major is all different. Again, not easier, not harder necessarily, just different.

You always have to figure out the nuances of each level and what you're dealing with and then how to win at levels. I think that's probably what I learned the most.

I think a lot of coaches at this level probably struggle to improve because they have an inability to really self-evaluate. And I've always felt like that's one thing that I've taken with me from Division II, from being an assistant coach in Division II for so long, is the ability to understand I don't have all the answers.

So I've learned a lot at this level from a recruiting perspective, from handling everything perspective, from what your players go through, all those different things. And certainly will take that with me to next season.

**Q. The Clemson guards seemed to put a lot of pressure on opposing guards full court. How do you take a little bit of that pressure off Bennett, or is it one of those situations where you trust your senior guard who's been there, done that?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, you have to have a plan. I think that's what you have to have. Outside of making sure that I tell you my plan, I probably won't do that.

But then there will be times where he's just got to bring it up against pressure, which it is what it is. It's just the nature of the deal. If you pressure and you extend your defense, then there's certain things that you give up and there's certain things that impact us negatively to where -- or positively, depending on how you do it.

Yeah, it all depends, too, on how it's called. It's so different. I've watched some of these games throughout, and every game is called a little bit different, and you're trying to figure out exactly, like, is it called exactly how the video that we watch every single year? I don't know that I've had many games this year that have been called based on the videos that we watch.

I think the ability to adapt to that very quickly is something that we're going to need to do. How is it going to be called, and then adjust to that and make sure that you play to that.

**Q. Kind of going off of the question about Bennett, with this being his last tournament and the experience you guys have had and the relationship the two of you had, what has it been like being able to coach him up to this point knowing this is the grand finale with your relationship with him one-on-one?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I don't really think about the finality of anything. It's kind of how I've always approached coaching. Senior night doesn't do it for me. That stuff isn't -- it just doesn't. I don't think my job is done when they leave. Once you're their coach, you're their coach, if they play for me for one year, if they play for me for five years, you're still their coach.

You won't have that day-to-day interaction that you have and you might only talk to them once every three, four months, but ultimately they know they can trust you. And if there's things you didn't teach them when they were here, then they'll call and they'll need those things.

Hopefully a lot of those lessons that he learned, specific to him, he's going to take with him. I always say the ultimate compliment as a parent -- and I think it's the same as a coach -- is that my objective is to work my way out of a job by the time they're done.

What that means is if you've taught them well enough, hopefully they have enough of those lessons with them that they don't need you anymore, and they just want you.

That's the biggest thing that we try to get to as a coach is get them to that point. Hopefully we did with Bennett and hopefully we do with everybody that we coach.

**Q. Cam and Bennett just talked about how you approach every practice and game like it is an NCAA Tournament game. I'm just curious, where does that come from? Why is it important for you to, I guess, approach everything that way, and how do you feel like your team is prepared because of your coaching philosophy?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, did they say I was nuts? Is that what they said pretty much? Yeah. Makes sense. Probably because I am.

Yeah, I mean, it's probably the nature of, one, who I am, and then, two, I learned that if you create that habit of being ready, then you don't always have to motivate yourself to get ready for the game because I've already established the habit of being ready every single day.

We're still not there as a program. Like, it takes so much

time to develop those habits, and then it takes an internal leadership to be able to do that.

Sometimes it takes two, three, four-year guys and sometimes five-year guys to be able to stay in your program and teach the other ones those habits of being ready consistently.

So for me, if I don't mirror that with the ability to be ready, the ability to be ready every day, then they don't create those habits.

Naturally when I was in college, I was probably the type that would stay up all night before the test and study and cram, and so I also have to make sure as a coach that I fight that. I'm probably over the top on the other side of it now, making sure that I do a little bit at a time and then create those habits weeks in advance.

Like maybe I'm playing Michigan in two weeks and I know they play a matchup zone and switch everything. We may start to touch on things two weeks beforehand, knowing that's out there. Not necessarily knowing because of a scout perspective, but maybe we spend five minutes on it so you're starting to cram for the test then rather than all at once. That's where we try to create those daily habits. Plus I like to compete. So I just love practice; that's my favorite part is practice.

**Q. Just curious if you have any relationship with Clemson coach Brad Brownell and either way what you think of what he's done with the program, first time he's made three NCAA tournaments in a row.**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I've never met him. I think he's a really good coach. I do know that. I think he gets the most out of his talent. I think he coaches for the most part, from what I see from the outside looking in, pretty good kids.

I think in the past, he's had kids for extended periods, which is always good, as well.

Everything that I've seen, he's a really good coach. Defensively they've always been really good. Offensively for quite a few years there, they were really good. I think it's probably dictated upon his personnel based on their offense. But then defensively they're always solid, tough, physical team, play hard. They always have a plan, a really good plan, and always finish top of the ACC. I do know all those things.

Outside of that, I have never met him.

**Q. You've had a lot of success when it comes to postseason play throughout all the levels of NCAA, but**

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**now here in your second year at March Madness, on the D-I level, can you talk a little bit about the experience change from last year to this year and how you feel maybe better prepared going into this year?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I don't necessarily feel any more or less, to be honest. No. Just because I've been to so many different things and I know obviously Division II level, I don't think it's what people think, where it's like, oh, my gosh, now you're Division I and you're Division I in the NCAA Tournament. It's not that much different.

As a matter of fact, it might be more difficult Division II sometimes because the region that you're in usually is a top 15 team in the country that you're playing first round. Here I don't think either of us are, right now, in the top 15 ranked, if that makes sense. So your first-round competition isn't the same.

Now, they're really good, but it's just so unique.

So those experiences in Division II, losing sometimes, losing first-round games, losing in Sweet 16s -- I don't know that we've ever lost a second-round game that I remember -- but losing in some of those really helps. And then obviously winning them certainly helps because you start to understand, like, what wins in postseason and all that you've put into that.

I wouldn't say that I'm more prepared necessarily. I feel prepared as my team is, and I think we are prepared.

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