

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Prairie View A&M vs Florida

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

**Prairie View A&M Panthers**

**Coach Byron Smith**

**Lance Williams**

**Cory Wells**

**Dontae Horne**

Media Conference



**Q. Cory, you spoke last night about what the win means to you and how you dream of this situation being in the NCAA Tournament and getting a win. Now that you've slept on it. What are the feelings now heading into another matchup?**

CORY WELLS: It still feels surreal. Can't really put it into words, but we've got another game tomorrow, so it's time to lock back in and look forward.

**Q. Florida, very physical front court. One of the biggest teams in the nation. How do you guys expect to match up?**

DONTAE HORNE: We know we're going to have our work cut out for us. We're just going to try to put all the marbles, all the chips on the table and just try to battle with them boys.

CORY WELLS: Yes, definitely. Just go out there and battle, play our hardest, try to double, whatever we can do to kick it back out on the perimeter. Because they have the size advantage, so just whatever it takes.

LANCE WILLIAMS: Like my teammates said, really just going to throw the kitchen sink at them. All we know how to do is play hard, so we don't have to question that. And just see where the cards fall.

**Q. What have the last 24 to 48 hours been like for you and then playing the defending champions two hours from their home.**

DONTAE HORNE: It's been crazy. I ain't got that much sleep. Phone been blowing up. Like Cory said, we've got to hurry up and lock in. We've got another game to go. I'm just worried about that. I'm glad we won, but had to let that go.

CORY WELLS: Definitely. It's just been nonstop. Been moving ever since. It's been crazy, hectic. We finally got to slow down a little bit this morning, so now it's time to get back to work.

LANCE WILLIAMS: It's been a lot of phone calls, a lot of texts, but kind of got to have short-term memory and lock in for this next game.

**Q. Cory and Lance, there's three guys on this team who played at Xavier University of Louisiana. What's the bond between you three, and how did you guys all end up at Prairie View?**

CORY WELLS: It's a great bond. Those are my brothers. Been through the fire with them, so you have a little connection, something you can lean back on.

But how we got here, it was just kind of coincidence really. We all got recruited by Coach Smith. I spoke to him briefly about it, but we came to our own personal decision that we thought this was going to be best for us, and it worked out.

LANCE WILLIAMS: Yeah, I would say everything really is just God's timing. I feel like we are where our feet are supposed to be. Coming to another school with two dudes you went through a war with, it kind of helps. Along with my other great teammates that we came and great coaches that we came to play with this year.

**Q. You guys did just about everything you wanted to on defense last night, forced 16 turnovers and converted them into points. Obviously it's a much different task against Florida, but what will be the keys to trying to replicate that defensive dominance?**

DONTAE HORNE: Well, we're going to try to keep the same mentality, go in, work hard, play hard, dig when we can, play the guards as tough as we can and try to create the same turnovers so we can get out -- the bigger they



are, I feel like the slower they are, so I feel like we've got more speed advantage.

CORY WELLS: Yeah, definitely. Just try to fly around. Rotation is going to be big, doubling, monsterring, whatever you call it, but we're going to try to trap and fly around and create some havoc.

LANCE WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think using our quickness to our advantage and really taking care of the little parts of the game like boxing out and rebounding, which gives us an even better chance.

**Q. You spent a couple years in junior college to lead you to where you are now. How did that prepare you for this next level and this tournament.**

DONTAE HORNE: I really have to shout out Eastern Oklahoma JuCo, Coach Scott Edgar. He kind of reminds me of Coach Smith. He's a hard-nosed coach and he always made sure I was prepared for a moment like this. He still texts me to this day. JuCo is where you go find yourself. It's either you want it or you don't.

When you're at JuCo, you don't have no money, no NIL, no restaurants, no nothing. You've just got to make sure you're there for the right reason.

JuCo is put there for you to actually just focus on basketball. So I feel like JuCo has been a blessing. A lot of people look over it, but I feel like if I wouldn't have went to the school I went to, I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't have that dawg mentality that I have. But I have to give praise to Coach Edgar.

**Q. You went four games in four days in the SWAC tournament, then last night in Dayton. Less than 24 hours later, you're here. How has this week been for you and the team?**

BYRON SMITH: Fun week. It's been a very trying week. We obviously had a long arduous week last week in Atlanta playing four games in five days and obviously making the jaunt up to Dayton for the First Four game last night.

But anytime you're winning, it's fun. It's worth it. Not a lot of rest. Players have been kind of getting after it. But we're thankful to be here, and looking forward to the challenge coming up against Florida.

**Q. You've been at this a while with Prairie View. To make the tournament in 2019 and be back, can you talk a little bit about the difference in experience from your appearance in 2019 to now and what it feels like to be**

**back here in March Madness?**

BYRON SMITH: I mean, it's a totally different team we're coaching now in 2026 than we did in 2019. Obviously with the NIL era, the mentality to pay for play, obviously the transfer portal, freedom of movement. It's just a different type of kid now that we're having to coach.

But it's still basketball, and we still enjoy working with these young people. I think it's been a real test for us as a coaching staff. Our staff has changed up a little bit.

But it's been a long time since we've had the type of success that we did back at that time. So we've been challenged as a staff, but it's definitely gratifying to be in the NCAA Tournament and be one of the best 68 teams that was selected to be here, earned the right to be here.

It's a fun time. Anytime you can be playing in March, one of the most prestigious sporting events in the world, it's definitely a blessing. So we're happy to be here and look forward to, like I say, our next challenge coming up.

**Q. What impresses you the most when you watch Florida on film so far?**

BYRON SMITH: Everything. You love watching them, obviously, when you don't have to play against them. A well-coached team. They've got size, athleticism, got play makers. They run good offense. They're tough defensively. They're big. They've got everything.

Obviously they're defending National Championships and obviously got off to a little bit slower start than I think they wanted to, but they've been able to round this thing and to shape it. They're playing really good basketball, so they pose a lot of problems for every team, not only Prairie View, for everyone that they play. They got going in the Southeastern Conference and they've looked pretty dominant.

Looks like they're on pace to make a run to try to cut the nets down. Obviously we're going to do our best tomorrow night to do the best that we can and try to keep this thing going. But it's definitely a difficult task. They're a well-rounded team, and they do a nice job for sure.

**Q. This is your fourth SEC opponent on the season. What did you learn from those previous three matchups?**

BYRON SMITH: I definitely would say Florida is probably the best of the lot. We played A&M and A&M was super, duper physical. I thought LSU was really, really good offensively. Missouri was a mixture of physicality and



some play makers and things like that. But I think Florida is the most well rounded of the four that we've played, and playing really, really good basketball right now.

Our biggest challenge, I think, is to try to offset their size to try to keep them off the glass because they can dominate you there. They get to the offensive glass, they're do a really, really good job. Once again they run really good sets on offense and they've got really, really good play makers.

They've got four or five guys that could be around 18, 19, 20 points, and they've got some guys that are going to be playing in the NBA here pretty soon. Got our work cut out for us. It's a challenge, but I think it's one that we're looking forward to.

**Q. You forced 16 turnovers against Lehigh just last night and really were dominant defensively, held them to 36 percent from the field. What do you have to do to make that type of dominance happen against Florida?**

BYRON SMITH: I don't know if I would say we were dominant. I just think we really tried to get after it. A lot of teams, they score the basketball and it gives them energy to go play defense. With us at Prairie View, it's the other way around. Our defense gets us going offensively.

I've always been a defensive-first coach, which is kind of funny because when I played college basketball, I was probably the worst defensive player that was on the court. My friends and my former teammates laugh when people talk about Byron Smith and defense. Those two were not synonymous.

We've always been a scrappy team. We normally lack size, we'll lack size tomorrow night, but we like to get after it and jam the basketball and overplay the passing lanes and try to score in the post when the ball is thrown on the inside. We really focus on defense. It's hard to get on the floor for Prairie View if you're not playing defense.

But obviously Florida can offset a lot of things that we do. Our biggest deal tomorrow night is to throw different looks at them. Obviously we can't just come down and just be 40 minutes of man-to-man or 40 minutes of zone. We're going to try to mix our defenses, throw them off. It's going to be a tall task, but we're excited. Thankful to be here.

God is good, and these young men have persevered, been through a lot of ups and downs with the season, but they've hung in there. We continue to tell them, tough times don't last, but tough people do. They've been a tough, resilient group, and they've earned the right to be playing against the Gators tomorrow night.

**Q. What are you saying to your guys in preparation for taking on the defending National Champions, and are they a little bit nervous? How are they feeling?**

BYRON SMITH: No, I'm just telling them, hey, savor the moment. For a lot of these guys because they're older guys, fifth year guys with no more eligibility, it's a once in a lifetime experience. Everybody grows up for the most part dreaming of playing in this tournament and now they're here. So savor the moment. It's the most important game because it's the next game.

But I don't sense any nervousness. I think they have a sense of we belong here. We've earned the right to be here. We don't get to pick who our opponents are, but we go out and we're going to prepare. And our emphasis and focus is going to be on the same thing, which is to defend the basketball, share the basketball, and try to be the hardest playing team on the court that particular night. That doesn't change if we're playing the Florida Gators, if we're playing Lehigh, if we're playing the Boston Celtics. It's all the same.

So I definitely think they're looking forward to this opportunity. I don't sense any nervousness or any jitters with our guys.

**Q. The challenge of facing the defending National Champions in terms of that, and how your guys maybe just deal with that aspect of it and not maybe be too awed by the opponent given their stature?**

BYRON SMITH: It's a big test, but I always live by the creed, no test, no testimony. One of my favorite athletes in the work, God rest his soul, is Muhammad Ali. So I think about the Rumble in the Jungle. I don't know if you guys remember that back in 1974 when Ali fought George Foreman. He was a big giant, and George was destroying people and beating the crap out of everybody.

But Muhammad Ali went in with a fearless attitude and he went in and he knocked off the champ. That's our mentality. Will that happen or not? It remains to be seen. But we're going in with a lot of confidence, a fearless attitude, and just going in and just being excited. I want our guys to have fun. We're here. This is special. This is special to these young men.

I think when you realize that, there's a fearlessness that they have that they can take on anybody and just do the best that they can. And we're going to be proud of them regardless of the outcome.

I think that you'll see a team with a lot of energy that will be

getting up and down the court tomorrow and just going to fight. It's a street fight to them. They're just going to throw as many punches as they can, and hopefully one will connect and maybe it'll stagger them. Who knows.

**Q. Obviously the turnaround time both in the conference tournament and in the NCAA Tournament is quite the task to handle and there's a lot of things that go with that. On a good note, what have been some of the things that you've taken away, and how do you feel the group has reacted to the opportunity to play two games in the span of three days?**

BYRON SMITH: Well, I got to bed at 4:00, but I was on the elliptical this morning at 6:30 -- oh, you mean the team? Okay, I'm sorry.

All these kids played AAU. If you guys know anything about that, it's four or five games in a day, two, three days a weekend. So we just tell them we have adopted an AAU type mentality. We've just got to keep playing. Right now they're adrenaline is at an all-time high, so I really don't think that fatigue will be a factor, if that's what you're referring to.

We don't have a long bench, but we've got some guys over there that haven't gone a lot of minutes that we'll be prepared to get them in the game and play and give some guys a little bit of a breather. I tell these guys to make sure we utilize time-outs, dead ball situations, and free throws to be able to gather yourself, get your breath and things like that.

But I think these guys are going to be raring to go tomorrow night, regardless of how many games we've played in a short amount of time. They're excited. They're happy. They're here, and I think they're going to go out and just put on an absolute show from an energy standpoint tomorrow night.

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