

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

Iowa Hawkeyes

Ben McCollum

Bennett Stirtz

Kael Combs

Media Conference

Iowa 67, Clemson 61

BEN MCCOLLUM: First off, congrats to Clemson. They had a phenomenal year. It's unfortunate that their big guy ended up getting injured. Obviously I thought he would have helped them. I thought they had a great game plan. They're super physical defensively. They keep the game, obviously, pretty close with their tempo, and so do we. So it was a good matchup both directions, very similar styles.

Proud of our guys. Sometimes it's not always pretty. Sometimes we don't always work with a high level of intelligence. But no one will question our fight. That's what we recruited. And I don't mean they're dumb players. They're not dumb players; they're smart players. But sometimes we do things that are just, like, out of this world.

What we never forget to do is fight, though. That's probably more what the compliment is meant to be. Certainly loved coaching them tonight. I'm going to love coaching them again on Sunday. It's still win or go home, and we're excited about the chance.

Q. Bennett, at times during the first half and second half they were making things difficult for you. How were you able to power through that personally and get your teammates involved scoring-wise?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, just leaning on our teammates, all my teammates and especially Kael Combs here. It's easy being on the court with him just because he gets everyone involved. If I can take a break, I can take a break when he's out there and he's going.



But yeah, just leaning on my teammates out there.

BEN MCCOLLUM: Did he just say take a break mid-game? We don't take him out. That's my substitution guy's only job is don't take Bennett out. That's his only job. That's all he does.

Q. Bennett, I'm going to pick up where Coach left off. It wasn't pretty but survive and advance, right?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, that's kind of been us this whole year. We know we're not the most athletic team or talented team out there but I think we're the most together team and we love hanging out with each other. So there's that.

We love fighting together, as Coach Mac says.

KAEL COMBS: I think if we can continue to keep on fighting and give max effort and stay together and communicate, we'll be all right.

Q. Kael, it was a really efficient night for you, 5 of 7 from the field. Is it hard to get into a rhythm in this offense where you're not always going to have a quick shot and a lot possessions.

KAEL COMBS: I don't think so. I think a lot of our shots are good shots, and that's just from getting the ball rotating and then dribble dive and kicking it open.

So no, I don't ever think it's hard to get a hard shot.

Q. For both of you, you got a whole lot of 50/50 balls. That's basically your moderm operandi: Play hard, play tough.

KAEL COMBS: Yeah, I just try to do whatever the teams needs me to do to win, and if that's going to get 50/50 balls and playing defense, running the offense, getting people open, that's what I'm going to do.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, we were used to being undersized in the Big Ten this year and we were used to the physicality so we knew we had to bring it and especially just out-rebounding them and playing harder on the glass and play tougher than them. I think if we did that,



we had a good shot of winning the game, and I think we did that.

Q. Coach, I don't think you were behind at all the whole game, 40 minutes. How important was it to get the lead and keep the lead?

BEN McCOLLUM: Well, keeping the lead is really important. Obviously you have to get the lead to keep the lead.

I don't know, these tournament settings are all unique. Some games, especially against this team, I thought you did have to get control because they're difficult to make runs on. So once you get a grip, they're not going to make huge runs, and we're not like a massive run team.

Now, you'll see us have 15-0 runs but it's more with our defense that allows us to make that run. It's not like a lightning strike and it's boom all of a sudden it's 10-0 run.

So in these games with the tempo the way it was we had to make sure we had the lead, got a grip on the lead, and got possessions, meaning got offensive rebounds, and tried to not let them get defensive rebounds.

Q. Ben, six of your eight rotation guys today were Drake guys. When you look back to last year at this time when you were making the decision of how to build this roster, why was it so important to have these guys that you were familiar with, and what does it say that they've been able to level it up to the Big Ten the way they have?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, and I think even like Kael -- Kael probably played, I'd have to look, 10, 12 minutes a game maybe for us last year. Tavion came off the bench for us; Sam Howard, same concept. Tate Sage, we signed him there.

Why is that important? I think at this level, one, we wanted to build a program, so we wanted to build a program from the ground up with a solid foundation, and so you have to allow yourself a level of patience. But in order to create that culture that you would like and the foundation, you have to get the right people, and I knew they were the right people. We've got tough kids that want to fight and want to do those things.

After that, at this level, there's a big deal. The longer I'm at this level -- and have only been here close to a year. The longer I'm at this level the more loyalty means a lot just because there's so much noise surrounding all of this, and there's so much social media, media presence. Everybody has got an opinion, et cetera, et cetera.

So you have to make sure that the guns are always pointed out, not in. We've got really loyal kids, and I knew that going in. Whether or not they're perfect, they're not, we've got our issues. I've got my issues. But what they're perfect at is loyalty, and they're touch, and they've established a foundation and a solid core. We're not done yet.

Q. When you guys down the stretch were trying to hold off Clemson, you obviously go down under 10 seconds on the shot clock. Do you feel like that frustrates Clemson a little bit and you guys find that one good shot late in the shot clock and they have to go down and try to match quickly?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think our points per session in the under 10 was like 1.4. I think it was the biggest we've had all season. Yeah, I think just because of the style of play that's why it was important to get a grip on the game because they don't play extremely fast we don't play extremely fast. And it's not because we're not trying to play fast it's that both of us have a little bit more difficult time getting a quality shot early in the possession, and they refused to take a bad shot.

Plus their defense is really hard to score on, so if you don't work it deep into the clock, you won't get the shots that you want, and I feel like our defense is the same way.

Q. When you look at your team and you look at how you play, when you look at another team, you try to give your guys an idea of what -- this is three games in a row where the other team has been missing a huge part, Clemson missing a big guy. How do you prepare for that knowing somebody is going to pick that up, but we don't know who?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, you don't really overthink it. It is what it is. There's injuries and stuff like that that happen throughout the season, and I've got guys playing through a lot of things. We just go in with the same game plan.

I think welling would have helped them maybe. Does it hurt them from a defensive perspective? I don't really know. Obviously they would like to have him. I don't know. I don't really think about it, to be honest. Just play the team that's in front of me.

Q. You guys had 15 offensive rebounds, out-rebounded them by plus 13. How big was that in tonight's win?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, in late-season play it's important to be able to get 50/50 balls, and I thought our kids did a

good job of that. We're used to it in the Big Ten. It's a heavy rebounding league, so you just have to get used to getting 50/50 balls.

I didn't think our defensive rebounding was elite. Probably need to be better there, but I was pleased with our ability to go to the glass.

Q. It wasn't easy at times for Bennett but he still found ways to make plays and eventually get the ball in the basket. You've been coaching him for a while. Where does that confidence come from him to remain poised throughout the game?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, and all of his shots were like back rim. He was on. He just missed them, but he was on. You could tell he was good. But he still controlled the game.

Where does the self-confidence come from? Probably his parents, probably his family, probably his upbringing. He has elite self confidence in who he is as a person and he's one that probably doesn't need a lot of the external stuff to make him feel like he's a good person. He talks about it all the time, and I know he talks about -- we actually just had a conversation the other day, like, your gift isn't necessarily yours, it's yours to give away, and he really believes that, where it's his gift that he's been given, but the only reason he's been give it is so that he can give it away. His gift is basketball and his gift is to make people have joy when they watch him, and then after that, then they act like him because he's a great human being.

I think a lot of that self-confidence comes from that, just his understanding of his gift and how he gives it away.

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