

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Iowa vs Florida

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

Iowa Hawkeyes

Ben McCollum

Bennett Stirtz

Cooper Koch

Media Conference



Q. For Bennett, what kind of confidence does Coach McCollum instill in you as a player? Yesterday even when the shots weren't falling you were running around, doing everything the offense needed. How much of that is from confidence from Ben?

BENNETT STIRTZ: It's a lot of it. I think that was my one thing that I really needed to get better coming in as a freshman from my Division II days. I think that's what kind of held me back as a player. He really helped me, instilled my confidence last year and it's just gotten even better this year.

Even when the shots aren't falling, he still wants me to shoot it. So yeah, a lot of credit to him.

Q. For Cooper, your dad obviously advanced to the Sweet 16 during as time as an Iowa Hawkeye. Have you had the chance to talk with him about your own opportunity and what are some of those conversations like?

COOPER KOCH: Yeah, he doesn't say much regarding games. He basically just tells me go out there, play your hardest and have fun but enjoy the experience with these guys.

Q. Bennett, I'm curious about playing at a deliberate pace. How have you adjusted to it and what do you see as some of the advantages of playing that way?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I mean, we would all like to play fast, but I think our advantage is playing slow and getting the best shot we can. But if we need to play fast, we can.

I just think it helps us win more games, just playing that pace really gives us an advantage.

Q. Bennett, how much has that style of play, if at all, changed from last year at Drake to now?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, it's changed a little bit, but I don't really think about it that much. We've definitely spaced it out from last year. We didn't have as much shooters last year. There's a lot more space on the floor to drive, drive and kick. So there's that.

But yeah, honestly don't really think about it that much.

Q. For either player, I don't know if you were aware of the final score last night of the Florida game. Was that kind of eye popping, and how do you feel about the challenge of facing the defending national champions?

COOPER KOCH: Yeah, we knew they're a really good team and they kind of got to an early lead in the first half and were able to sustain it. We've got to come out, play our pace, and keep it a close game.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, not a discredit to Prairie View, but we kind of knew coming in what we were going to have our hands full, and obviously they're a well-coached team, play the right way. They're talented at all five positions for Florida. Yeah, our hands are going to be full, but we're going to take full advantage of the opportunity, and to be the best you've got to beat the best.

Q. Bennett, Florida plays obviously a faster pace than you guys. With that style of play that you guys have, how much do you feel like if you guys enact and get it going, can frustrate them and push the game in your favor?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, we kind of saw it last year when teams like Vanderbilt and Mizzou in the Tournament. Just the SEC is a whole different pace. I think if we can set our defense and get good shots on the offensive end and then set our defense, I think that will really help us. I don't know if it'll mess with them at all, but yeah, just focus on what we can do to help us win the game.

Q. A lot of people are making a lot of the tempo aspect



of this game. Ideally how would you like to play this game?

BEN McCOLLUM: Whatever puts the ball in the basket more than they do. So if it's slow or fast is irrelevant, it's just a matter if we can put the ball in the basket more than they do.

I don't think we probably focus on it as much as most people think. I think it just naturally happens, probably two reasons. One, it's probably more difficult for us to get a quick shot, and then two, I think our defense dictates a little bit of the tempo as well.

We try not to give up as much easy early shots as most do, so you're having to work a little bit longer in the shot clock as well.

I don't know, they play fast regardless, so they overpower you and they're pretty good at it. I guess we'll find out tomorrow.

Q. We talk a lot about Bennett and his impact on the culture, but there's also Tavion, Alvaro, how much are the guys that you've brought over with you helped shape this culture and now here in the tournament kind of have you drawn back on their experiences last year or is it kind of different?

BEN McCOLLUM: It is different. They've shaped it, though. I think having six guys that came with us from a program that won 31 games makes a big difference. They also learned from three others that I had coached for four, five and one actually six years, Mitch Mascari, Daniel Abreu, Isaiah Jackson who were with me at Drake. They helped teach these six, and now these six helped teach the next. And then eventually we'll get guys in the program for a consistent amount of time, and then it kind of runs itself.

I think that's to me the sign of a good program is my objective is to work my way out of a job by the end of the season, that the players are coaching the team. We really try to do that as a program, too.

The objective is to work your way out of a job, don't tell me boss that, four or five years in, and let the players coach the team. That's the best way to do it.

Q. Alvaro had a good game last night. What do you think makes his skill set unique?

BEN McCOLLUM: He can really pass. He can really pass. He can finish. Obviously I think he hit a three last night. He did a better job the second half defensively, I thought. But most importantly, probably his passing is one of his

greatest strengths.

Q. What were some of the traits you saw from Bennett going all the way back to Northwest Missouri State when you first recruited him to where he is now?

BEN McCOLLUM: I saw him in high school. We offered him as a junior. Then spent a year recruiting him, didn't commit to us until after his senior year in April, I believe.

You just saw a competitive spirit that you had to watch a little bit more because on the floor he's just kind of like here, and then me is not here. He has more highs and lows. I'm more emotional.

But we both get to the same point. We're both very, very competitive, and we do stay pretty process focused and we are able to move on to the next play, even though sometimes it doesn't seem like I'm able to.

Then into his freshman year, I remember our first scrimmage we played a team called Wayne State out of Nebraska, and he was God awful, and I mean awful. I remember sitting there thinking, he got done, he's like, Coach, do you even think I can play -- I don't think he asked me that but gave me that look, do you think I can play at this level? I think I said, Yeah, you'll be fine. Then next we game we played a Division 1 and he had 25. The rest is history.

Freshman year he was great, sophomore year he was second-team all conference and last year he was MVP of the league.

I think the biggest thing you saw is him understanding how good he was. I think a lot of our players, we recruit to humility, we recruit to guys who want to serve their teammates. So naturally sometimes their humility can be so strong that they don't understand how good they actually are. That was him. So you just had to bring out some of that, like, edge and hey, you are this good to him, and that's what you see now.

Q. How much has the system you run changed from Drake to this year? I asked Bennett that and he said he tries not to think about it and the only thing he noticed is the spacing is really different because you guys have more shooters.

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, it's a little bit different. We do have more shooting. It's probably more difficult to finish at the rim at this level, so you have to adjust some of those things. Probably a little bit more random this year than we were last.

Those things are probably slightly different. But we're completely different than our last -- his last team at Northwest Missouri State, where that team had a lot of shooting.

It just adapts per year, but it's slightly different from an offensive perspective, and then defensively, we've got a little bit more length, more physicality and guys that have been in the system. So that certainly helps. I'm probably missing one or two defensive guards that we had last year, which hurts us.

Q. Bennett spoke yesterday postgame about how the togetherness of this team and the chemistry they've built under you really was an underlying factor in the win yesterday. How do you feel that might play out come game time tomorrow?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, hopefully it plays out well. We're going to need all of it. I think that when you play a team like Florida that's super physical, really well-coached, play extremely hard, and they're national champions. I think it's difficult. You have to connect and make sure the guns are pointed out, not in.

I think our guys are connected, but we'll find out tomorrow.

Q. Playing in the Big Ten, you guys have been undersized and a lot of these matchups, and Florida will probably be no different. How do you feel like that, I guess, preparation or just the constant fight of being undersized, how do you feel like that'll bode well going into this one?

BEN McCOLLUM: Again, I don't know. Obviously being used to just big bodies certainly helps. I think Florida is a different animal in regards to that. I think they're just so physically imposing, and that's what they do. It's not just a part of their system, it's who they are. That's their identity.

But it certainly helps to play the Michigan States, the Purdues, Michigan obviously is massive. That certainly helps us, helps prepare us to a certain level. But again, every team is different. Every situation is unique.

Q. You know what it takes to get a team to go back to back. What does it take to stop a team from going back to back?

BEN McCOLLUM: Oh, good question. Yeah, I mean, I think that it's the same for anything. I don't think you overthink necessarily the back to back per se. I think it's more a good team can do that. I think that the first time we won a National Championship in '17, we actually had -- my point guard broke his foot going into that next year so we

didn't win that one, but then the next year we won it and the next year we won it and the next year we won it, and then COVID. So COVID helps stop some of those things, too. We don't want that again.

Then we lost a bunch of players after that, and then we got upset in the second round. There's no real recipe to being able to do that. I think that you've just got to compete and be better than them that day.

Q. With this game being played in Tampa and considering the proximity from Gainesville and the whole Florida fan base expected to -- a large amount of Florida fan base expected to be here, how do you approach this game that's kind of like an away game?

BEN McCOLLUM: With excitement and enthusiasm. I mean, it makes it more fun, doesn't it? I mean, you're probably going to enjoy it more. I think the fans will enjoy it more. I think our players will enjoy it more. I think it makes for a cool venue. I'd rather have it that way. I'd probably rather have it black and gold, but we'll take this.

We'll take some blue out there, I guess. We had blue last year, so I'm used to blue.

Q. Bennett has still been getting shots off. It appears he's struggling to get them to go down. How do you get him into more of a rhythm and to start making shots more consistently, especially at this point in the year when you need him against such a talented team?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think a lot of it is just getting quality ones, especially early. I think yesterday his first one was probably a little bit contested from what I recall. I think it was a left step-back, and I think it was pretty contested. So just making sure you kind of see that first one, keep your rhythm going.

But it's not always going to be perfect. You're not always going to make every shot. It just is what it is.

But his gravity, he still creates so many opportunities for others, meaning your attention to it is, and the second they decide that they don't want to pay attention to him, he's probably going to make all the shots. They're paying attention to him pretty heavy and it's pretty contested. I'm not overly concerned with it. Obviously he's going to have to be able to score for us to win to a certain level, but he doesn't need to go have 30 points for us to do that.

Q. A big picture question if you don't mind. You obviously have experience at the mid-major level. There's a lot -- the mid-majors haven't done particularly well this tournament so far. What do you

make of that in terms of how it fits into everything?

BEN McCOLLUM: Why mid-majors haven't done well?

Q. Yeah.

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I mean, probably a lot of guys transfer up. There's probably an NIL component to that. There's probably a transfer -- it's more the transfer thing to that. Just having gone from level to level, obviously I really enjoyed Division II, and I loved my year at mid-major, and I see a lot of the perspectives of high majors not wanting to play mid-majors, and I'd be one of them, because you're rewarded for the NET, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to a certain level, so you need to make sure that you play that.

But I also see why high majors are in the Tournament. Going through a season in the Big Ten, it's a different animal. It's different. That's why they're rewarded late in the season.

Part of it, too, is matchups. Obviously High Point, I thought they had a really good matchup. I thought Miami of Ohio had a good matchup. What other mid-majors have won? Have they won? VCU is just good. Saint Louis, Josh Schertz, he's as good as there is, he's a D-II guy. Those are good teams. I mean, three of those have probably the most NIL

of any mid-majors, I think, or close to it.

That's a part of it. It's just the amount of players.

Then the coaching, all those different factors kind of go into it, as well.

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