

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Northern Iowa vs St. John's

Thursday, March 19, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

**Northern Iowa Panthers**  
**Coach Ben Jacobson**

**Ben Schwieger**

**Trey Campbell**

**Leon Bond III**

**Will Hornseth**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Student-athletes Leon Bond III, Ben Schwieger, Will Hornseth and Trey Campbell.

**Q. Trey, we'll start with you, as you look at where you are right now, four years at this school, in your hometown, what do you think has been the biggest key for this year's team to go finish off kind of the legacy that you've been building? And what it's meant to get to this point for UNI?**

TREY CAMPBELL: I feel like just all our hard work ever since the summer we've been building and we've been working hard. We continue to work hard throughout the whole season and it's starting to show off right now.

**Q. Have you rewatched the 2010 second round game against Kansas? And what kind of effect does that have on you guys coming into this tournament?**

LEON BOND III: I've definitely watched the clip a few times. It's pretty cool. I'm pretty sure it's in our intro video, so seeing that every time we play it's been real cool. And honestly being here it just gives us energy and I wouldn't say hope but just a little extra motivation.

**Q. You guys averaged just above nine in turnovers a game for the best in the league and have you a really good assist-to-turnover ratio. How important is that ball security, maybe more so even at this time of the year?**



BEN SCHWIEGER: It's huge just trying to take care of the ball, being strong with it, playing through contact and just being more physical than the other team. And then just sharing the ball on the offensive end, just getting it moving and just keep that movement going.

**Q. Will, you guys go through the adversity of you've missed some starters with some injuries throughout the year. How did playing through that make your whole team better and prepare you for what you guys did winning the conference tournament and what you guys are going to do here?**

WILL HORNSETH: Every player had to step up at different times. So we did face some injuries throughout the year and that just gave opportunities to other people to fill different roles, to try stuff out and really fill out our team. And I think that's a real advantage is that different players have played different positions and we're more versatile because of it.

**Q. In the conference tournament, you guys were the lowest seed to win ever. What kind of just energy does that give the locker room coming into a tournament like this?**

WILL HORNSETH: I think it's just the belief that we can do it. We have high expectations for our team, and we really don't care what seed we are. We know what we've got and we know who we are and what we're capable of. We saw it there as a six seed, winning four games in four days, and hopefully you see it here too.

**Q. What's the biggest challenge going against this team in your guys' minds, and in film study, did you guys see anything you can exploit?**

TREY CAMPBELL: We say physicality, that's the biggest thing coming into this game, and continuing to stack than wins, big physicality, rebounding. Obviously they're a big, physical team. We've got to hold them to that.

**Q. Coach Pitino is one of the most storied coaches in NCAA history. You're playing against the players, but what do you think about the coach, if anything at all?**



BEN SCHWIEGER: Obviously respect to the coach and all their staff. But at the end of the day, it's 5-on-5, us five against them five. So we're going to handle it on the court.

**Q. They actually mentioned Coach Pitino. Wanted to ask about your coach. He's obviously been in Northern Iowa for a while. He was there when they last made the tournament 10 years ago. So just kind of what knowledge has he passed on to you guys? What confidence, any stories or anything like that that he's passed on to you guys this week?**

TREY CAMPBELL: Just to stay true to ourselves, really. We know the work we put in. Don't try to be anyone we're not. We're going to win this as a group when we're all doing our roles. So kind of just filling our role and doing what we know we can do.

BEN JACOBSON: We've had a good week, good workouts on Monday and Tuesday. Yesterday was a travel day. We took the day off. Just got done with a workout. Guys have been good. Looking forward to getting back out there.

For us it's a little different with our league tournament, but we've been through it before. It's been that way for a long time in our league where you have an entire week off before you get to Selection Sunday. And then you find out your opponent and you start your prep and you get ready. So not something we've been through before. Our guys have handled it really well.

Obviously we're playing a tremendous opponent. Terrific team and as you know Hall of Fame coach and great depth, and, man, just really, really good players.

For all of you that have watched them, they play extremely hard. We know we're playing a terrific team. Looking forward to getting out there tomorrow.

**Q. You've returned so much of your roster, have so much homegrown talent. I've spoken to some coaches who have gone on Cinderella runs and they've talked about how important togetherness is. How much of that do you guys have given the makeup of your roster?**

BEN JACOBSON: We've got a lot of it. And it is, it's been one of our strengths. We had 11 players come back. There's a handful of reasons. But one of them -- last year we won 20 games, we played in the NIT.

We graduated three seniors, a fifth-year senior in Tytan Anderson, Jacob Hudson was a two-year guy for us, and Cael Schmitt was a one-year guy for us. But everybody

else came back.

They came back to win a league championship, win our tournament in St. Louis, compete in the NCAA Tournament. They stayed together to be where we're sitting right now and to play tomorrow.

So they know each other well. This is kind of a two-year deal, from a roster standpoint, for our group. And they've been great. You want to talk about having fun with a group of guys, they're having a blast together.

I've really enjoyed the way they've continued, as the season has gone along, the way they've continued to take on more responsibility and more leadership within the team.

Like, their communication, as well as they know each other, their communication and their determination to really lead each other and lead our team as players has increased as the year has gone along. That has been fun to be a part of.

**Q. How much pride do you take in the fact that you were able to return that much of your roster in the era we're in with college sports?**

BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, we take a ton of pride in it. And I appreciate you asking that question. I mentioned Tytan Anderson. He was a fifth-year guy for us last year. He was the second-best player in our league a year ago. And he had plenty of opportunities and could have left for more money and decided to come back.

Northern Iowa means a lot to him. He trusts us and we trust him, so he knows when he makes that decision. He knows what his role is going to be. He knows we're going to throw him the ball. He knows he's going to be our guy. He knows he's going to enhance his professional possibilities when the season is over as a senior because of the things I just mentioned.

And he wanted a place to call home. He and his family have always been that way. You get a guy like Tytan a year ago that sets the example and sets the bar at a high level in terms of what his school, what Northern Iowa means to him.

So this year, Trey Campbell and Leon Bond and Ben Schwieger and Will Hornseth, our all-conference type guys, they just got done hanging around with Tytan Anderson. It means something and it runs through our program. Their legacy means something to them. And we take a lot of pride in that.

**Q. On that note with roster building, I'm curious, as a smaller school with limited resources, how do you decide when you're going to rely on the 11 guys that you have coming back versus when you're going to take those dips into the transfer portal and use those resources that you do have, and kind of how that process is and how that process evolves kind of throughout each offseason?**

BEN JACOBSON: So we haven't changed our recruiting philosophy. It's a question that we had to answer the same as everybody else four years ago: What are we going to do here? What direction are we going to go? How are we going to best navigate this?

Our answer at that time was to continue as best we can, continue to do it the way we've been doing it. And that is recruit high school players and get them in the program so that Tytan Anderson being a fifth-year guy, and Trey Campbell being a four-year starter, it continues to start there, right, with high school players.

And we signed three terrific guys this fall. One just won a state championship. We've got our two other are playing for state championships this weekend. Like, three really, really good players.

And then we'll obviously get through the season. You get to the spring. And it's about the guys on our team, sitting down and having real conversations. And we're able to do that because we've got great relationships.

At that point, right, okay, is everybody coming back? We've got our freshmen signed. What do we need? And most of the time it isn't just a thing where as a head coach we need this or assistant coaches say we need this.

It's something that our entire roster, our entire program, all right, we've got our group back, got our freshmen coming in. We need a power forward and we need a point guard. Or we need a guy who can really shoot it in the backcourt or we need a center. It's really obvious to all of us.

We'll use the portal for that. And it's been a good formula for us. And I talked a lot about the retention and our players, our roster returning. But we've used the transfer portal effectively and quite a bit. Leon Bond and I don't know who else was up here, Benny and Leon, Tristan Smith is a one-year guy for us. He's terrific. These guys are terrific players. Jacob Hudson, a year ago.

So the portal's been really important to us. But that is on a need basis for us.

**Q. Why and how did you land on that philosophy?**

**Also, has it evolved over the past four years? Or have you stuck with kind of what you landed on four years ago?**

BEN JACOBSON: We stuck with that decision, and I would tell you maybe the first part of your question, Greg McDermott got the job in 2001. I came with him as his assistant coach. We were together for five years.

And when we got the job, Mac said, we're going to recruit the state of Iowa and we're going to recruit the best players in this state. We're not going to get all of them, but we're going to get some of them.

And Minnesota was the next spot, really important for us. And we got some terrific players out of Minnesota. And Wisconsin and Illinois, the states that touch us. That's what we said we were going to do when we got there in 2001. And great formula for us.

Now, we've expanded that a little bit. You look at our roster right now, RJ Taylor and Geon, from the state of Michigan, so if you look at our roster we've expanded it a little bit.

But the foundation is the state of Iowa, the state of Minnesota and the states that touch us, and we got obviously with Leon and Max and Will from Wisconsin, but that's a state that touches us.

It's been a place for a long time. The adjustment would be, okay, what do we do in spring after our roster, who is coming back, right? Which for us has been most everybody. Which high school guys are coming in? And then, okay, what do we need exactly? What specifically do we need? That would be the add-on, is what do we need out of the portal.

**Q. Tomorrow actually marks the anniversary of your guys' last NCAA Tournament game. I'm curious how you reflect on that, what you maybe learned from that game, and what it might mean to get another opportunity to exorcise the demons on that?**

BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, yeah, that was one hell of a weekend. For those of you that were there, some of you sitting there were there and a part of it. I'm certain that many of you watched it, right? It got everybody's attention with the half-courter and then the subsequently two days later with the last 45 seconds.

A couple things I would tell you. And when we won last week and we beat UIC for our championship, people asked a lot about, okay, man, it's been 10 years -- and different than your question -- but that 10-year thing came up, I've



told them like, these guys don't know anything about that, right? And they're the most important part of this story, if you will, is our players. They don't know anything about the 10 years. That's number one.

Number two, for me and like my wife and my two boys and our school and our fans, 10 years is a long time. It feels great to be back. But again, I'll go back to number one. These guys don't know anything about that. It's about them.

In terms of what we learned in that, yeah, I'll tell you, it took a good two, three years for me, just rolling through in my mind, because as coaches and as leaders, I think we feel such a strong responsibility to make sure, in my case as a coach, our players are in the best possible position to be successful.

And we were there. We were there against Texas. We were there against A&M. So it took me a while to figure out, man, what in the world could you have done different. That's more about me and my coaching. And these guys don't know anything about that.

**Q. When you look at St. John's and you saw them come up and that was your opponent, were you a little bit surprised that they were a 5 seed given that they were the champions both in the regular season and the tournament for the Big East?**

BEN JACOBSON: Yes. And I had watched them play some during the year. I hadn't watched a lot of their games, just during the season. I've watched a lot of them now, right, since Sunday.

But given that, winning both -- and I think it's, I don't know how many in a row, or out of 20 -- and after the bracket comes up and then you start watching film, then I would say yes again. I try not to get too into what seed who gets. But yes to answer your question. Surprised that they're a 5 seed.

**Q. I was wondering, how much have you crossed paths with Coach Pitino. And if so any memorable exchanges or anything?**

BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, our teams have played against each other. Outside of that, not very often. But we've competed against each other in a couple different situations, in the NCAA Tournament, in the Battle 4 Atlantis, just a couple different places.

**Q. What stands out the most to you about him?**

BEN JACOBSON: How much time have you got? There's

a reason he's got, I think, 900, I think he's past 900 wins. Obviously he's as good as there is. There's maybe that group of coaches that they say, wow. And he is one of the, what, three, four, five of those guys that -- he's just --

You could talk about how his teams, how hard they compete. You could talk about how prepared they are. You could talk about the roster build and the talent. You could talk about the camaraderie of the guys when you watch them. Attention to detail. Like all of those things that -- and maybe some of those get lost a little bit because he's been doing it so long and he's so good at it where they talk about what I did first, the 900 and the hall of fame, that small group of coaches that are that good.

But it comes down to the things I just mentioned -- his attention to detail and compete like crazy. Man, his teams are going to do those things.

**Q. For this year's team, for the better part of three months, you guys have been the number one scoring defense in the country. What impressed you the most about how this unit has taken your defensive principles that you started preaching all the way back in June for these guys and made that their own at such a high level?**

BEN JACOBSON: I'll tell you, I felt like we would be good defensively. But after we're in maybe six, seven, eight games, I was like, this is better, this early, this is a little farther along and a little bit better.

I go there first to say I think these guys have taken a lot of pride in that end of the floor. And that's got to be one of the first things that happens.

It starts for us in June. Like, we don't do a lot of competitive things in June. We do more in July. But we start doing some individual things in June that lend themselves to the defense and blocking out and diving on the floor. So that's just part of the way we start every year. So that piece has been really good.

For our size and length across the board is pretty good. That's proven to help us. And it will be a challenge tomorrow because there's more size and length on the other side in the game tomorrow. They've got tremendous size and length. So it's going to be a challenge.

But I just feel like they've been willing to dig in at the defensive end. And they're also super smart. Like we can adjust things when we need to because they've got really good feel and they're really smart about the way they go about it.



**Q. You mentioned whether you were doing film study on St. John's, the preparation and how hard they play. In terms of their personnel, are there certain guys who you take a look at and see as a problem? How would you describe the things that are going to be problematic for you that you need to confront?**

BEN JACOBSON: Quite a few of them. If you're talking individually with their personnel, it would be easy for me to go through a lot of this roster. The depth is good. That starting unit is a lot of size and length, and the versatility -- and I think the versatility at both ends of the floor, what they're able to do defensively, they can do plenty of switching.

If they want to switch all five, they can do that. If they want to maybe stay a little bit and switch when they need to, they can do that. The feel and the savvy of their team defensively -- and, again, it feeds back into their preparation and their attention to detail and what they're getting every day from Coach Pitino every day I'm sure.

And offensively, the same thing. There's guys that can do so many different things. It puts a lot of pressure on your defense.

Then you've got the three or four guys that can really shoot it. And the two or three guys that maybe create more off the dribble. Then you've got the three or four guys that do both.

That's where I say, from a roster standpoint, just really well constructed and they fit really well together. There's challenges with a number of them.

**Q. You guys average the least turnovers in the league and have the business assist-to-turnover ratio. How important is that ball security at this time of the year? And also how do you maintain that against a team like St. John's?**

BEN JACOBSON: It really paid off for us in the Valley tournament, playing four games in four days. We didn't turn it over much. You're right on. We just didn't turn it over much.

And that leads then to the way that we've played, really, the last five or six weeks, but at the highest level in the Valley Tournament, like our efficiency offensively, like what we were getting out of -- well, whichever part, we seemed to be fairly efficient. Whether we were in transition or we were in the half court with our base offense or running a set, we were pretty efficient.

So to your question, right, the more times that you're

shooting it and not turning it over. So it really helped us in the Valley Tournament with those four games in four days.

And tomorrow, yeah, that's going to be the key to the game because there's the full-court press. There's the denial on the sideline, pressure when you inbound it on the baseline on your basket. So you're facing it all of the time. So it is, it's going to be one of the keys to the game, our ability to take care of it.

**Q. Piggybacking on the offensive side, Coach, you look at the 19 games when you guys were healthier, scoring margins plus 12. Last five games is plus 14. What have you seen develop in the offense that has had it clicking at the right time at such a high pace with your guys?**

BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, Tristan, we got through Max and RJ's injuries in December. For those of you that don't know us as well. Two of our guards were hurt and missed most of the month of December.

When they got back, early January, Tristan Smith went out for four or five weeks. So during that time, the other guys had to move around, different positions, and they've gotta figure out how to make things work and so that was one thing that helped us when Tristan got back, is the other players had to play in other spots and they had to learn how to do different things.

And then we've gotten healthy. Then you get Tristan back and Max and RJ are healthy. Now we've got a healthy team. We've got guys that have been figuring out how to do things without Tristan. And so now they're just a little bit better, a little more equipped, and you get him back and that's really fueled us, is having everybody back, but getting Tristan back was a big deal.

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