

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

Northern Iowa Panthers Coach Ben Jacobson

Trey Campbell

Leon Bond III

Tristan Smith

Media Conference

St. John's - 79, Northern Iowa - 53

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from coach Ben Jacobson.

BEN JACOBSON: Well, that wasn't what we anticipated, I would say. We've got a good basketball team, and the start of the game, obviously, shifted a lot of the rhythm or momentum or however you want to kind of picture it in your own mind. It just put us in a tough spot. So for me, I wish I could do that part over.

Once you got past it, once we were past the first three, four minutes, it was a pretty even basketball game for a long time. So one of the things we talked about in the locker room, with the team and with these -- we've got these three guys here -- was knowing that you earned your way here, knowing that you belonged here. This team is good enough to win games in this tournament.

Our opponent, they're really good. We knew that coming in. But it doesn't change that we earned our way here and that we have a terrific team. And if we get off to a little different start and able to find a way to get past these guys today, we have a good enough to win on Sunday.

I love what these guys did to get us here, right? I wish I could have put us in a couple different spots and helped them out a little bit more, and I know they wish they could have made a couple different plays. But we've got a hell of a team. I'll leave it there.



THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Coach is saying how you guys got off to that rough start, but you guys did play them even for most of the rest of the game. What did you guys figure out? What do you think changed, I guess, during that time that you think could go toe to toe with them?

TREY CAMPBELL: We just need to slow down. They wanted to speed us up, get us going, get us jumping in the air, throwing passes. That's what they did that first kind of few of minutes.

We called that timeout and kind of got ourselves together, played at our own pace, and that kind of started to work for us.

Q. I know this is probably the last place you want to be right now. Could you describe how the season was like for you and the road you guys have been on in this journey, coming from being a 6 seed in your own conference tournament to now playing in March Madness, what was it like for you?

TRISTAN SMITH: This was an incredible year. I mean, we had highs and we had lows. And I think it just goes to the credit and the culture that the Coach and the staff has built here. We were able to withstand them all.

I mean, most seasons are going to have highs and lows, but I think we stayed together as a team. And I think that was the biggest thing that allowed us to, when we got to March, be playing our best basketball.

Q. St. John's shot 47 percent in the first half beyond the arc. Out of halftime, there was good defensive spells by you guys. There was scoring droughts by St. John's. Just what was clicking defensively in the second half with you guys?

LEON BOND III: I think we just settled in, honestly. Like Trey said, we collected ourselves and we honestly we gapped it up. We flew out. We covered each other. So I would probably say we just settled in.

THE MODERATOR: We'll move on with Coach.

Q. Similar question, from your standpoint, I guess the difference between how the game started and, I guess, maybe the run at the end versus that stretch, 20, 25, 30 minutes in the middle where you were right with them?

BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, when we cut it to 13 early in the second half, from the four- or five-minute mark, where we dug that hole, to that point it was basically an even basketball game.

Sometimes it takes a while. Like, you can get on the practice floor -- and we've got a tremendous scout team. This is one of the best scout teams that we have had. But it's not the starting five from St. John's.

The press and the offensive rebounding, and their length defensively to blow some things up, it had us a little bit out of sorts.

We got to the basket three, four, five times in the first five, six minutes, and they either blocked it or impacted the shot. Sometimes you've got to get into the game and get a feel for things.

That happened and then we played them even for 20 minutes or so and gave ourselves a little bit of a window. When it was 13, I think we missed a 3 to cut it to 10, I think. So we just about cracked that door open.

But like the guys said, I think most of that is being on the floor with St. John's and getting a feel for their length and their size and everything they cover up. That was a lot of it.

Q. It was pretty purple in there. Just tell me how you feel about having that much support coming all the way out to California?

BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, great crowd today. And you go back two weeks to the Valley tournament, our crowd was just amazing. They barely sat down for four days at the Valley tournament. And a lot of those same people are here.

It's also one of the kind of neatest things, coolest things about the NCAA Tournament, is not only the fans that were in St. Louis, but it also brings a lot of friends and family.

This is the best of the best, right? This is why these guys work so hard is to get themselves in this position and take the court with everybody in the country, every bar in America, like everybody's watching. This is why they do it, right?

So it brings a lot of friends and a lot of family. I've got a lot

of them here myself. And that means a lot, right?

Q. You've been asked the question, you said yesterday, it's been 10 years since you were last here. Now you've been out there again. How did that feel? What are you ready to take away from this going into next season?

BEN JACOBSON: It's kind of a two-year deal for us. Last year we win 20 and go to the NIT. And everybody comes back. We graduated Tytan and Huddy and Cael. They were terrific as seniors, but everybody else comes back. So it's kind of a two-year deal.

Yeah, now you get them all to come back again. And you get back here and you win a couple games, and then who knows what happens?

We've had three teams that were good enough to get to the Final Four, right? And this team, I know the guys will probably hear this, but St. John's is not a 5 seed. God dang. And we expected, hey, listen, we expected to beat them. That's not what I -- when I say that.

They've won 19 out of 20. They just won the Big East. They just won the Big East Tournament. We had a tough, tough opponent, right? You wouldn't have known it, in terms of our preparation and the expectation and where the guys were at.

We felt like we were going to win today, okay? That's not why I say that about St. John's. They're just -- it was a tough draw.

But, yeah, what you do now, is, like I said, you sit down with your guys. And I'm really, really thankful and grateful for the relationships we've got with our players. And so we can sit down this week and talk about, coming back, because what you do is you get back, you do it again, you get back here. And now we've got a little bit of experience with some of these guys that will be back next year.

And then you find your way through a game or two. And then, man, I'm telling you, who knows, right? When you get to the next weekend.

Yeah, excited about what the guys did. Really excited about where we're at, you know, where things are at with our program.

Q. Coach, we saw a few possessions of zone defense in the second half there, and that did seem to slow St. John's down offensively a little bit. Was there some hope there that that would maybe spark you at the offensive end as well?

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BEN JACOBSON: Yeah, as you know, at that point for the Panthers, that's a little bit of a wing and a prayer. We were going to need them to miss shots. And they did. They did early. We didn't score enough. They missed -- I think there was four or five possessions where they didn't score, didn't capitalize. We didn't score enough. We needed to score on all of them at that point.

We were going to have to get lucky at that point. We needed to do something different because it had gotten back to 20 after it was at 13. Our window was when it was 13.

We talked about at halftime, get it to 13 with 12, 13 minutes left. That was our window, and we weren't able to crack it. Yeah, so with eight to go, we just had to try something different.

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