

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Tennessee State vs Iowa State

Friday, March 20, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

## Tennessee State Tigers

**Nolan Smith**

**Aaron Nkrumah**

**Travis Harper II**

Media Conference

Iowa State 108, Tennessee State 74

MODERATOR: The Tennessee State Tigers are with us how. Head coach Nolan Smith is with us, along with Travis Harper II, and Aaron Nkrumah.

NOLAN SMITH: First, great game by Iowa State. I wish them nothing but the best as they move forward in the Tournament.

I'll just start by saying I'm extremely proud of our guys, and I told them in the locker room that they're legends. What they did for Tennessee State, for themselves, just extremely proud of them. Obviously not the way we wanted to finish score-wise tonight, but being here is something I want them to hold their heads up about.

From my first year as a head coach, I couldn't have asked for a better group of great young men, leaders, guys that bought in to winning with my staff, getting here end of July. They didn't really like me at first. I think we're pretty close now.

But just so proud of them. Yeah.

MODERATOR: Questions?

**Q. For both Travis and Aaron, you guys knew what you were getting yourselves into today, but did they surprise you at all with their strength, their toughness early on in that game and particularly the 23-0 run?**

TRAVIS HARPER II: You know, it's a good team. A high major. So we prepared our best for it, but we just ended



up not coming up on top. So it's a great team, like I said.

I hope they go very far in the tourney. And that's pretty much it.

AARON NKRUMAH: Yeah, they are a good team. I feel like they didn't really shock us or anything coming out the game. They were just more prepared than we were. They fought harder than we did. We tried to respond, but I feel like it was a little too late. But hat's off to them. They're a great team. Just fell short.

**Q. Aaron, from prep school to D-III here, can you put all of this in perspective just the journey you've been on and what this meant to you even being here this weekend were?**

AARON NKRUMAH: This weekend was a lot. I'm blessed to be here with a great group of guys, a great coaching staff. The journey here, honestly I wouldn't rewrite my story any other way. I feel like that's makes me who I am. That's what makes me play the best way possible every game.

So I just feel like me coming from where I'm from and the route I had to take to get here, it makes me feel like I have a target on my back. I've been playing from the ground up for 10 years now, trying to get to where I'm at.

It's a blessing, like I said, a great group of guys, great coaching staff, and happy to be here with them. These are my brothers, father figures for life, man. So, yeah.

**Q. For the players and Coach Smith as well. You mentioned a second ago about kind of what that transition was like whenever he took over as coach in July. What other challenges do you think you guys faced throughout this season to get to this moment?**

AARON NKRUMAH: You know, teams always go through a little adversity. We lost some games. It wasn't Coach's fault. We just had to buy in to what he was bringing to the table. Players gotta wake up on the same page every day, going to practice, doing everything we do.

I feel like that's what brought us to where we are today. The little dry spell we had early in the year where we



couldn't finish off games and stuff like that. So I just feel like that's the biggest thing for us. We overcame adversity, and that's why we're here today.

TRAVIS HARPER II: You know, speaking on adversity, I mean, besides the coaching change, like you said, we had a few players that were we were expecting to play. Some got hurt. Some redshirted. But just fighting through that and just falling in love with the process, trusting the journey is, like A.K. said, it's what got us here. Just sticking together through all that is just -- it shows a lot about this team and the coaching staff. It's just love. It's just love everywhere.

NOLAN SMITH: Yeah. This group of guys, they bought into the process of becoming a champion, and that process has bumps in it, has challenges, has adversity, has everything. And every loss we took was a lesson. All these guys always responded to every single lesson. Goes all the way back to our Alabama-A&M loss, to the SEMO loss to everything.

Becoming champions is never easy. So, again, for me to have a group that responded every single time was okay, having the tough conversations on how we need to grow up, where we needed to change, how we need to handle our body language to become a champion and look like champions and act like champions. What you all saw today was a group of guys that went out like champions and they fought hard to the very end.

**Q. Nolan, if you could just speak to the historic thing that this has been for you guys, to win the OVC Tournament, to get here, to break that long drought, how special it is.**

NOLAN SMITH: It's been extremely special. I think when it finally set in what these guys did, it was -- I think I told them pretty quickly that they're legends, they're legendary. They'll be forever remembered in Nashville and the TSU community. And it probably took me a little longer to process what these guys did. I come in late July, I had no clue what I was getting myself into. I'm first-year head coach. I'm just like, all right, let me see if I don't mess this up. And thankfully I didn't.

But then when people started telling me around the city, man, 32 years, we're champions, and just seeing the love for these guys and support, then it starts to hit me, like, man, these guys really did something incredible, something they get to tell their children, their children's children and go back to the Gentry Center and look up facing the banners and see "2026 OVC Champions" and another banner that says "March Madness." What these guys did was incredible this year.

So, again, can't say how many times how proud of them I am.

**Q. For Travis or Aaron, Coach Smith has talked about how you guys are legends now on campus community and in Nashville as a whole. When you kind of take a step back and try and reflect on what should be some of those lasting memories of this Tennessee State team and kind of what you guys will ultimately remember about there run?**

TRAVIS HARPER II: Can you repeat the question again?

**Q. What ultimately as Coach Smith kind of called you guys legends within the context of your season and what you accomplished, what should be some of the lasting memories of this Tennessee State team?**

TRAVIS HARPER II: You know, obviously we went on a historical run. We won the OVC championship and we ended up going to March Madness. So obviously we didn't finish the way we wanted to, but at the end of the day, you know, like everybody has said, we're legends in Nashville. It's something that hadn't been done in so long, so people are going to remember us. That just means a lot to me personally, and I know it means a lot to everybody else on the team, including the coaching staff. Just being a part of it is great.

AARON NKRUMAH: I remember last year coming into campus and just trying to make a name for myself, proving myself. I always was preached you're going to get on the court if you play defense. So I feel like for me, that's what it was for me coming into Tennessee State and like coaches always say defensive leads to offensive, it's always going to work around.

So I just feel like for me defense is what made us. I feel like I brought my defensive intensity and everyone bought in and everybody reflected off each other. We feed off each other. That's what kept us going all year.

So I really think like we're so historic because of our defense. Like last year, coming into this year and then Coach bringing his championship DNA, like I feel like our championship DNA is what made us. Like, I don't know. It's just we're a legendary team, man.

**Q. Coach, kind of what did you take away from this whole experience and how can you use being here to build towards the future?**

NOLAN SMITH: Man, I love building off of winning. Right? I'm obsessed with winning. I think these guys will tell you I

say winning probably hundred times a day just in practices, winning, winning, winning, winning. So to be able to build off this group, I'm excited to see what's next and how we get another group that's just like these guys that buy into winning, buying into being in March Madness consistently.

This is where my staff and I, this is where we want to be. This is the expectation. When we wake up, we wake up every single day ready to win. So that's what we're going to do and these guys have now set the bar extremely high. The these guys that come in have to defend like this group. They have to be a top 10 in the country like this group was. They have to score more than 81 points a game. They gotta do better than that. They have to be as close as this group was. That's what I'm going to go get now. I have to rebuild and go find the guys that really fit this culture and this winning culture.

So to establish that in year one, again, I can't say enough about these guys.

Again, as a coach, man, it's what they do. That's one thing Coach Cade told me when I first got there, now, go get some players. I said, I think I got some this year. At the end of the day the players make the coach. I'm not in this position. I'm not sitting here without them getting buckets, without Deuce making threes, without A.K. being Player of the Year and this first-teamer right here. That's what I gotta go find. I gotta go find guys that have heart and care about this game like these two guys did, and they're going to make me look good. That's all.

**Q. For both the players, you guys talked yesterday about this being a dream, and I know the scoreboard didn't reflect necessarily what you wanted today, but how cool is it, for lack of a better word, that you ended it here on this stage?**

AARON NKRUMAH: It ain't really hit me until we came out on the court. Everybody's hand just hanging over, trying to like dap us up and stuff like that. So I mean, you got the band. The lights are so bright. Like I almost got hit in the head with a ball because I didn't see, like the light was just too bright.

But, yeah, that's the environment we all dreamed of playing in. It was surreal. But once the ball was tipped and we started playing, it was basketball from there. Obviously we fell short.

But it's a blessing. You're never going to forget this. I'm going to remember it for the rest of my life, going to tell my kids about it. Going to go home, call my parents, tell them how it was out there. It's just a blessing.

TRAVIS HARPER II: Yeah. Like A.K. said, it's a blessing and just, you know, I try to treat every game the same, no matter who I'm playing or where I'm playing at. At the end of the day it is just a game, but this feeling is just walking out there and seeing everybody, 17,000 people just watching me, obviously never had that.

It just means a lot to have everybody back in the city watching me. My family just watching me. It just meant a lot to me.

**Q. I already talked about next season here. College sports is so transient for players and coaches these days. What makes you want to stay at Tennessee State for next season?**

NOLAN SMITH: Building something special. Building something special. Why wouldn't you want to continue to do what you just did? Right? Why wouldn't you want to come back and repeat? We've set the table for that.

Now I'm going to go have some conversations with my athletic director and get this done, so we can run this back.

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