

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Iowa vs Nebraska

Wednesday, March 25, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Ben McCollum

Bennett Stirtz

Cam Manyawu

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, obviously we're excited to be playing. I think anytime you go to a Sweet 16 or you advance in a tournament, I think you can settle in a little too much. So hopefully what we're trying to do is understand that we're still trying to win and trying to advance and keep going further and further. We got a tough group, a group that's connected and, again, excited about the opportunity to play tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

**Q. What do you think this game will do for the rivalry between Nebraska and Iowa?**

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, I don't know. Growing up around it, obviously there's Iowa, Iowa State, and Nebraska are all kind of rivals. Usually you probably -- none of us like any of each other is kind of how it works. So I don't know that it's going to excite it any more. It's one of those things that when you grow up around it, you understand it, you get it. I probably don't -- when you're in it, like, when you're playing, you probably don't really pay attention to it, to be perfectly honest. I hate to say that for Iowa and Nebraska fans, but it's irrelevant that they're Nebraska and we're Iowa, in my mind.

Maybe from an outside perspective, it's a little bit different, but for me, it could be Florida, Clemson, Nebraska. It's irrelevant. It's the next opponent and they're a really good team.

**Q. What are some of the lessons you learned at the DII level, the Mid Major level, that you've applied to the success you've had this season?**

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, actually, I just had a conversation about that a second ago. I think the beauty of being at Division II is you're allowed to make a lot of mistakes and do a lot of things wrong and a lot of things right without external noise.

So initially when you become a head coach, there's a lot of things that you really have zero clue on and there's still quite a few things that I have zero clue on. But certainly when I took over it was like, man, I don't really know anything. But there wasn't noise associated with that from other people. It was me. It was the pressure that I put on myself or our staff or whatever it may be.

So over time, you create a level of confidence in what you do and how you do it. Then for us, we were fortunate enough to play in a lot of NCAA tournament games, a lot of high-pressure games, and we figured out what it took to actually win those games and play in 'em, which we were able to take to the University of Iowa, obviously, and be able to perform in post-season play and whatnot.

But, yeah, it's interesting, you see a lot of coaches take over, it's their first year and they, like, finish fourth or fifth and it's almost like the kiss of death. Like, the higher you finish, the worst you're going to be as a coach because you never hit rock bottom.

Well, we were dead last my first two seasons. So you kind of hit rock bottom, you better figure it out. We figured it out and then now we're able to continue to figure it out as we go forward.

**Q. With this being the first year of coaches' challenges, it seems like you had probably the most impactful one of the whole tournament so far late in your last game. Can you talk to me about what all goes into that, who is making those decisions, and how big of an impact do you feel like that challenge had for your win?**

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, I mean, a lot. We had to challenge two and we were right on both. A third, we were

going to challenge, but you only get two, and the third one we would have been right as well. So what goes into it? I look at my video guy who knows when there's a possible challenge and he's scared to death at that point. He used to try to explain it to me, Well, it might have bounced off this, it might have done this. I'm like, Dude, yes or no, do you want me to challenge it or not? Like, yes or no?

And he had me challenge one -- I think it was in the first game that really -- is that the one you're talking about or the second game, the two in the second game? Yeah. So there's one in the first game that was good too, but -- and it will be, Hey, yes or no, yes or no? And then one of 'em he said, Yes, challenge it. And I go, You better not be wrong. And he kind of sits there and he's like, Oh -- he goes back and looks. Well, I had already challenged it, and then as we overturned it, he yelled something back at me, which was really nice of him. So it was entertaining.

But we've got a really good video guy, got a really good staff, and so they pay attention to it. They know to only challenge if you're a hundred percent certain. I don't want 90 percent. I want a hundred percent. Late, late game maybe you just challenge it just to see if you can, you know -- I don't know, just see if you can get one overturned. But throughout the game, we make sure that we're right when we challenge.

**Q. One of the main differences, in your mind, between Game 1 against Nebraska and the second go-around?**

BEN McCOLLUM: I thought they just played better than us the second time around. Obviously, they made a few adjustments, we made a few adjustments. I think they just played better and they beat us. So hopefully we can play better this time. Obviously, there was some little nuances that they changed. They changed a few things spacing-wise, they changed a few things with their defensive presence, how they did things. Then we adjusted some things too. But they just outplayed us. They were just better that night.

**Q. Back to the challenges and that one with 1:10 left in the Florida game. How big of an impact do you think that was, and were y'all a hundred percent sure on that one?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yes, we were. Yeah, he was a hundred percent sure. And I didn't even look at him. He called out to me. He said, Challenge that one, Coach. So I really have nothing to do with it. I just put a lot of pressure on everybody to make sure they're right. So I'm just the mean guy over there. It's my staff and Jace, Michael Smith Jace is his nickname. We have one of the best film guys in the country, in my opinion, and he does a

great job of that.

**Q. You and Todd had some intense moments in that game. Why was it important for you to match that intensity and match that energy that was coming from their sideline in that game?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I'm always pretty intense, so I guess the banter would probably be the thing that I matched a little more. Yeah, I mean, I think when you get into those situations, into those games, there's some heat in those games, and so there's naturally some -- I don't know if there's, like, intensity back and forth, if you will.

But I didn't understand what was going on, and then just kind of started yelling at us, and so then I yelled back and that was that. I have kind of moved on from it, moved on from it five seconds later, to be honest. You're also not going to -- you can't just let people do that either. So there's a fine line between the two. But you can't sit there and get into arguments with other coaches all the time either, so I need to make sure that I use a little discretion. In that situation, I felt like it was appropriate, but I'm not going to get into a habit of that.

**Q. What are the challenges -- you guys played Sunday night and you had to regroup, go back to Iowa, then travel on Tuesday to Houston. Nebraska played Saturday, was able to get home early Sunday, watch you guys play, and then kind of have a little bit more prep time, rest time. What are the challenges maybe with the turnaround that you guys faced with playing Sunday night and having to play Thursday here in Houston?**

BEN McCOLLUM: I mean, probably the challenge is my director of basketball ops setting everything up. This level is so bougie. It's like -- I mean, we get back and then I get a text that says, Be here at this time. The plane will be there. You will drive right up to the plane, you will get on the plane, everything will be done for you, the food will be there, all you have to do is bring your computer and scout. Then we get to the hotel. Everything's perfectly set up.

So I guess for me, I guess I don't think there's a lot of -- there's a lot more challenges than their challenges. It's just a day difference. So I probably don't read into it. I've been at Division-II for so long. I played junior college. I mean, you make your bus trips and you are ready to play. If you're not ready to play for the Sweet 16, then you probably shouldn't be here. That's kind of my thought.

**Q. The Big Ten has three teams here just in this Houston regional. They have had a really good showing in the first couple rounds of the tournament.**

**What within the Big Ten has prepared you guys to compete in this March Madness tournament and is there anything that maybe you saw that separated the Big Ten's experience from when you played Clemson and Florida?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think the Big Ten this year in particular, there's a lot of really good skilled players in the Big Ten like in size with skill. And then the coaching, a lot of these teams don't beat themselves. It's not a free for all and they do have guys that are in programs. You look at your Purdues, some of those program, some of the Michigan State, some of those programs that have guys in their program for multiple years at a time. So they have some experience. That's a big deal in post-season play. How did it prepare us? I think the night-in night-out grind prepared us. I do think sometimes it can hurt you too. Meaning you get exposed a lot and if you get exposed too much you eventually it can break you. Fortunately we've got a really tough team and so it didn't break us when we got exposed quite often. It just sharpened us up a little bit and got us ready for the post-season.

**Q. You and Bennett have advanced in the NCAA Tournament, this is the third year in a row, all different levels. What's the key to that? Why does that relationship work so well?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Works great -- fourth. No, I'm just kidding. It works great because he is, like he see him on the floor, and then you see he me on the sideline, so polar opposites in personalities. Not polar opposites in values. So he's super competitive. I'm super competitive. I feel like he works with a level of humility. I feel like he's a really tough kid. I feel like he serves others, all those different things. He kind of exemplifies exactly what it means to be a Hawkeye. I think from a post-season perspective. He also understands the value of his teammates and you can probably look no further than the last play of the game when he made that pass. So he gets the best out of his teammates and has for the last four seasons.

**Q. Your culture stuff you believe in, the way you coach, where does that come from? Who are your influences?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I would say my first coaching influence was Steve Tappmeyer. He was my head coach at Northwest Missouri State, one of the best DII coaches there was. Just from a culture perspective he understood again the value of people, he understood how to get the most, he understood the daily habits that go into it. That would probably be from a cultural perspective my No. 1 influence from just a coaching, the coaching aspect of it.

And then outside of that you've got -- my mom is very competitive, psychotically competitive, worse than me, to be perfectly honest, so don't watch her on the sidelines. But, yeah, so you get a lot of that from a few people, and then there's been a lot, a lot of other people that have really helped along the way though. I mean, you're just asking for a couple, but I mean, it's a product of youth coaches and high school coaches and just friends' parents or just a random person that you've connected with throughout your life. All of those I take influence from an certainly helps build the culture.

**Q. What do you expect the atmosphere to be like tomorrow?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Hopefully really good. Hopefully loud. Hopefully people are engaged. Hopefully it's a fun game. Yeah, I expect it to be just like the Florida game. Just loud and engaging and exciting and March Madness. That's what make it's fun. So that's the hope. And if it's not, it's not, we'll still get after it. So we'll get after it regardless.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. You guys are obviously new to the Nebraska Iowa rivalry, what have you learned about the intensity of this rivalry just playing two games now against Nebraska this season.**

BENNETT STIRTZ: It's obviously pretty intense, both teams care about their sports, and I think it's any sport you play, Iowa-Nebraska, it's going to be high-level intense and people care about it a lot. So it will be a packed out arena and just looking forward to it.

CAM MANYAWU: Along the same lines of what he said, just how much both fan bases and teams care about the rivalry and just how big it is and both games we were pretty were super intense and high level, so really just excited to play in a rivalry game in this type of environment.

**Q. Y'all hit a rough patch late in the year and then bounced back to what we're seeing now. How did you do that, what changed for this team?**

BENNETT STIRTZ: I thought we stuck together in the hard times. I feel like we were in every game, even if we were down a lot we still found a way to make it close we just couldn't get over the hump. We knew if we stuck together and with our backs against the wall no one thought about themselves or anything like that no one was selfish we just wanted to win. That's what I think we did. We knew we could make a run and then just in the Big Ten tournament we unfortunately didn't get it done. We were

close again. Then we stuck together more than anything just getting ready for March Madness, so that's what we did and hopefully we can keep rolling.

CAM MANYAWU: Yeah, we like he said, we stayed together and we knew we were close and, but close wasn't enough for us, so just trying to figure out how to get over the hump and win some of these games. Understanding that there's no better time than March to figure it out. So just trying to gain that confidence of knowing that we can finish these games, but we were close the whole time, so sticking together, understanding we're right there, and trying to control the controllables and going back figuring out what it is that we're not doing and trying to correct those things and slowly but surely we started correcting those things and now being able to flip some of those results and get wins.

**Q. Bennett, what makes your relationship with Coach McCollum so special you've been with him obviously for a long time.**

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, the amount of trust I have in him, and that he never lies to anyone on this team, including me. He shoots it straight. Even when it's tough and even when it's hard. He pushes you past your limit and I think that's where the trust comes in and he cares about you a lot and wants to make you a better person. So, yeah, he just pushes everyone on this team and honestly you can see the benefit from that and even in the wins that he's all had throughout his career, he doesn't get complacent. So that's what we need to do and continue to do is even though we beat a 1 seed, we can't get complacent, we got to keep getting better every day and get ready for the game tomorrow.

**Q. Bennett, Nebraska in that first game you scored 25 points. Second game they held you to just 11. What did they do to limit your productivity, and how do you guys plan to get that fixed going into tomorrow?**

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, they obviously did a great job and I wasn't on my A game that game. But doesn't matter if I score zero points and we win the game, that's all I care about is just winning the game. So unfortunately I didn't play well at all, but that's a testament and credit to them, their defense was ready to go and I didn't really get many look, many clean looks at the rim or from three. So it's not a big worry because even if I don't get any looks and lots of eyes are on me then Cam or Kale or any of the other guys on the team will get looks. So, yeah, just trying to get everyone involved and if I need to go score a bucket hopefully I can do that tomorrow.

**Q. You guys have played for Coach McCollum a long**

**time, that situation where him and Coach Golden were kind of going at it, is that been the guy he's always been and as players when a coach does that do you kind of feed off that knowing your coach is not backing down, even to a guy that just won the National Championship the year before he's like, look, I'm not backing down from you in that moment.**

CAM MANYAWU: Yeah, 100 percent. Our kind of thing is we're all fighters, and he's the main one. So knowing that, I mean he's going to go down swinging, we're all going to go with him. So knowing that we're going to follow him wherever he goes, so we're going to, we're just going to make sure that if he's -- he's our leader we're going to follow him to where he's trying to take us and he's trying to take us to the top, so just trying to follow everything that he does and listen to him and he'll help us get these wins.

BENNETT STIRTZ: He's a lead-by-example dude, and if you see him getting intense and trying to fight the other coach, you're going to want to do the same thing to the players. So we just follow his lead and he does a great job.

**Q. What kind of confidence do you get when you knock off a No. 1 seed and a defending champion the way that you all did?**

BENNETT STIRTZ: I think you get confidence for a night and then, honestly, Coach McCollum and the coaching staff really did a great job just leveling our heads and getting on to the next game, so we didn't really celebrate too much. We can do that after the season. Literally all we did the next day was watch film and get back to Iowa City and just get better at practice and just take it one day at a time, one practice at a time, one game at a time.

CAM MANYAWU: I think Coach McCollum has just tried to preach the team that we can be and the team that can go on a run. So winning that type of game just gives you the confidence to know that you've done it, especially for a team like us where we've been close so many times and so to finally kind of break through a little bit and be able to win a game like that it just gives you confidence going forward that no matter the situation you can do it and we've shown that we can do it and the coaches did a really good job of just making like he said keeping us grounded, showing us what we did wrong and what we did right and so what will help us going forward. And then also the things that we can cut down on that could have lost us that game.

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