

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

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

**Iowa Hawkeyes**

**Coach Ben McCollum**

**Tate Sage**

**Bennett Stirtz**

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference



Iowa - 77, Nebraska - 71

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, I think to start we weren't fantastic to start. They had an elite game plan to start. They played with elite pace. They adjusted their defense quite a bit. I think a lot of people will talk about the rivalry. I was around it when I was in Iowa, you know, and grew up in Iowa and understand the rivalry and whatnot. It's nice to have -- I guess if you would call it rival that runs such a class program.

I think Coach Hoiberg, they have got great kids. They completely turned everything around from the previous season, and they have absolutely nothing to hang their heads about or anything. I have the utmost respect for them, all their players, and especially Coach Hoiberg. Heck of a season. I know it's no consolation, but we still want to beat 'em every time and they want to beat us every time.

But from an internal perspective, there's not a lot of bad blood there. It's actually a lot of respect. I was really pleased with our second-half performance. I thought we actually decided we were going to try -- not try. They had a lot to do with it, but kind of. Yeah, they're smiling over there because they saw me break my marker.

And I thought our kids did a good job of executing offensively in both halves. We spent a lot of time trying to make sure that we could score, and you saw the result of

that. We didn't defend. But we were able to score, so we were able to stay in the game long enough and then get enough stops and had some big possessions down the stretch. Really good program win for everybody, coaches, managers, everybody included.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. 58 seconds left. They've got four players on the court. Can you walk us through kind of what you-all saw before that basket?**

BENNETT STIRTZ: I was pretty shocked to see Alvaro wide open. I didn't even know they had four players on until we were in the locker room. Kael threw a great pass. We were able to move on the baseline, so that helped out a lot, and Al had a nice dunk.

TATE SAGE: It was kind of the same for me. We were going to throw it to Bennett but, then we looked down and Alvaro had nobody on him, so we're, like, Kael, throw it, and ended up getting the bucket.

**Q. Big moment. It was 65-65 about five minutes to go. You guys got a pair of stops and then three consecutive missed threes by Kael, Bennett, and Alvaro. In some cases, that could be a dagger. You're looking back after the game saying, Boy, we had an opportunity there. What did it take to keep getting stops and of course then Bennett and Tate both hit a couple of threes there to take your first lead?**

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, I thought we had two kind of not great shots, probably. Then I thought Kael's was a really good shot. We had the ball moving and popping, and it just found him at the top of the key, and he missed it short. But that's part of these games is you have to depend on your defense. I thought once we figured out the direction they were going offensively, we were able to at least keep it at bay. I thought we did a better job of making sure they couldn't get below us as much and not getting layups, etcetera. Did a better job with our hands. Our hand activity was much better. We boxed out.

We were just okay. They actually kind of punked us on the boards, which I think that's something that they probably



had a big-time strategy of, and they did, they punked us there. But in that stretch, we were able to get those stops and then get enough points to be able to win the game.

**Q. You mentioned breaking your marker. At what point did that happen and what was your message to the guys in that timeout after y'all tied it 65-65?**

BEN McCOLLUM: You should have asked them the message. Don't do that, actually. It was probably the first timeout. It was just we were trying to predict what they were going to do. So what happens is you don't impose your will. You let them impose their will on you. You try to predict, you look slow, you're behind plays, and we got a behind a lot of plays.

Now, they played with great pace offensively. I mean, that thing was hummin'. Like, they were moving and cutting, and I didn't even know what was going on. So, yeah, then we called 'em into the huddle and just said very nicely, I would like you to play harder, guys, and it seemed to work.

Isn't that right? Isn't that how that went?

TATE SAGE: Yes.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yes.

**Q. Bennett, two years ago you're playing in the Division-II tournament and now you're a game away from going to the Final Four. Just what is this moment like for you and did you ever envision this happening two years ago?**

BENNETT STIRTZ: Not at all. Honestly, after my college career, I'll look back on it, but right now -- I know it sounds cliché, but just focus on the moment right now, and not looking past, not looking ahead, just taking one foot in front of the other right now and, honestly, done celebrating already and on to the next.

**Q. This is the lowest seeded Big Ten team to ever make the Elite Eight since seeding began in 1979. How do you feel about being called a Cinderella? For both Ben and Bennett.**

BEN McCOLLUM: Maybe they should have seeded us better. No, I'm just kidding. They seeded us right where we should be. Yeah, I mean, I guess there's Cinderella. You know, we were so close in a lot of games and I don't like to use that. We were right there. And then we lost some games we probably shouldn't have. I think part of that is it's just like those games where those teams get up, we don't have enough just complete talent to be able to overwhelm maybe the bottom tier teams in the Big Ten.

So we lose a couple of those games that we maybe should have won if we're at 97 percent. 97 percent doesn't work for us. We have to be at a hundred percent.

Yeah, Cinderella, whatever they want to call us, just we're in the Elite Eight. That's what they need to call us.

BENNETT STIRTZ: You can't control what other people are going to say about us. We're just focused on what we can do, and I think it's a testament of how we play and how hard we play and how hard our coaches coach us. I think the recruits we're recruiting should look at that and it's super fun to play here and why not. Why wouldn't we want to win a bunch of games and go on long runs in the tournament. This is just a start and he's going to keep it rolling and we're going to keep it rolling this year.

**Q. After the win in the round of 32, heard about how Alvaro wanted the ball in that moment. And then in the first half, he's got the dunk where he's streaking down the middle of the lane and nasty one late and a couple big shots. What have you seen from him in terms of that confidence and being able to build here in the tournament?**

TATE SAGE: Obviously Alvaro's a great player and he's shown that, but I think it's his leadership, that he is stepping up and making big-time plays, and that's who the player he is. He's a great player and him stepping up, hitting shots, and getting downhill, like, that has been crucial for us.

BENNETT STIRTZ: I think he's just not shy of the moment and not scared. I think some people shy away from it and go in their little show when moments get too big and he embraces it and he wants to play well in these big environments.

**Q. Can you share some thoughts on just you and Bennett, that connection you guys have had? Everywhere you guys have been you've won. You guys did it again tonight.**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, in 20 years it will be an insane story. A guy that goes from D-II with his coach and then goes to Drake and then goes to University of Iowa and actually make it's further in the tournament in Division-I than he did in Division-II. Yeah, I mean, obviously there's a close relationship there.

I think once we get done with it all, it will probably grow even more. I think when you're a player-coach sometimes, you obviously care for each other and love each other and all that, but you don't get to connect on that kind of level. But it's been a hell of a ride, but it's far from over.

**Q. You were able to keep the game at just three points at halftime with how well Nebraska came out. How big was that just in the big picture the way Nebraska came out that you only had it down to a three-point lead by halftime?**

BEN McCOLLUM: That was huge because they were absolutely punishing us. I mean, it felt like it was a 50-point lead, to be perfectly honest. Like, we just made enough shots to hang in there, so then we were able to keep it close, and then we decided we wanted to guard that second half, which was good. And it slowed their tempo down a little bit, which was nice.

But, man, they put it on us to start. Their game plan was fantastic. They're obviously a very well-coached team and have really good players. But, yes, to keep it close in that moment, because I thought they were about 20 points better than us in that first half.

**Q. If I could flip it over, we asked Coach about you. Can you share some thoughts on your connection with Coach? You guys have won everywhere you've been and it's been historic for you guys this year too.**

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, he's turned me into a great person off the court and a great player on court, too. Honestly, I don't want to talk about it that much. I get emotional. That's just another topic for after the season that we can look at. Right now just focus on the next game.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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