

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Iowa vs Illinois

Friday, March 27, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Ben McCollum

Bennett Stirtz

Tavion Banks

Alvaro Folgueiras

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement.

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah. No, we're excited to compete to be able to get to a Final Four. I think our prep today was good. We'll get into some film on Illinois, which we already have done. Again, excited to compete, excited to fight, can't wait for tomorrow.

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

Q. Bennett, I wonder, what were your impressions of the Big Ten this season playing in the league? And also, are you surprised at all this many teams from the conference are still competing?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, not surprised at all. I think it's great for the Big Ten, great for the conference, just to see this many teams in the Sweet 16 and the Elite Eight. But, yeah, it's a physical league and I knew that coming into it. It's like any other league, every game's going to be tough, especially on the road. You're never going to have a game off, so you had to bring it every night. Obviously it was a step up from the Missouri Valley. Yeah, but not really any surprises there.

Q. What stands out from that game against Illinois back in January and maybe where have you seen them improve when you scouted them today or last night?

TAVION BANKS: I barely remember (smiling).



ALVARO FOLGUEIRAS: We get so many scouts and so much information that you have a clue of what they do and their profiles as a player. But when you play three games per week and you get so many information on every single game, we play almost 40 games, so it's hard to remember. But we know they are a really good rebounding team, really good bigs that can think, and they are a really good team.

BENNETT STIRTZ: They're a lot better team than the first time we played 'em, so obviously we'll watch some film from our game and see what we can do better. We're going to both make adjustments. But Keaton's playing a lot better as a freshman and all their players have made great strides this season. We played 'em early in the Big Ten conference, so they have definitely got a lot better.

Q. Bennett, do you remember your first time meeting Coach McCollum?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yes, I do. It was in high school. I think my junior year he came and watched practice.

Q. Could you share your impressions at that time and could you have imagined how your past would be linked and that you would be at this moment right now?

BENNETT STIRTZ: It's pretty amazing. He won three straight Natties before I got to meet him, so it was obviously pretty cool and I had no other offers. So definitely in shock when I first saw him and, yeah, it's been a crazy journey so far and hopefully keep it rolling.

Q. Bennett, bouncing off that, you've been with Ben at three different locations the last four years. What is it about him, the person that he is -- coach and the person, I guess, that you feel has made you guys so successful, especially him at every stop he's been at?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, he just pushes you past your limit. I think he shoots you straight and never lies to you. Sometimes it sucks because -- the discipline and everything sucks in the moment, but it makes you stronger mentally, physically, emotionally. It just makes you a stronger person and it makes you think that you can just accomplish anything. So just gives you the confidence and

puts the trust in you.

Q. The story of your lawn mowing business has continued to circulate. Two questions for you. One, when was the last time you mowed a lawn and how has business been lately?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, man, it's great. Great to hear. Last time I mowed a yard was probably last season. So I probably went home on a weekend in the fall. And back in K.C., I don't think we've started up yet, so after the season, I'll probably go back on a weekend and mow some yards. Looking forward to it.

Q. Can you share some thoughts on just your path and your journey and getting here and just what it's all meant to you.

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think I got into coaching to try to change kids' lives. So obviously went to Northwest Missouri State. We won enough just by kind of that process focus of trying to make kids better. Then I think it was just the call to move forward to Drake, and then obviously to Iowa after that.

But it has been a lot. It's been two years of -- from the outside looking in, it probably seems like the dream, and it is a little bit. But it's probably a lot harder than you think just because you miss so much from a family perspective.

But I've got great players, great kids, that I get to hang out with every single day. I go to work and hang out with my best friends. It's a good life. But it's nice to be somewhere where I was at for 15 years and now two years of moving has been tricky.

But from a basketball perspective, it's been awesome, it's been fun, it's been challenging. I've come out of my comfort zone. I had my butt kicked a few times this year. Hadn't happened in a while. So it's been good.

Q. Al, you said last night that the small neighborhood of El Palo is a little bit known for being life smart. How do you guys come about that reputation?

ALVARO FOLGUEIRAS: Well, in Spain the translation was not life smart, I guess, but I think it's that we tend to find some life hacks. That is the truth.

BEN McCOLLUM: That's what it means? Okay. You hustle a little bit.

ALVARO FOLGUEIRAS: Well, no, not really. Having fun just in our lifestyle. Spanish people too. It's kind of generic. So, yeah, I mean, I don't know how to explain it

better.

Q. You joined Ben at Drake and then you came to Iowa. It seems like throughout the season, you have played a key role to help Iowa get here. But what role has Ben played in your development going from JuCo to being a key player on a Big Ten team?

TAVION BANKS: Just what Bennett said. He's a very honest coach and he's going to always tell you the truth and just be hard on you. It's just because he cares about you. I believe that's a big role in my life because there's not really -- there's not that many people that would do that, just be really honest with you and just push you and challenge yourself on and off the court.

So I just, you know, put my -- I believe in him, at the end of the day, no matter what they say. I just do my job and whatever he says, I just do it, don't question him.

Q. Al, we've been told that when you first came to the U.S., you didn't know a ton of English. So how have you picked up the language or is there any funny stories with how you learned to speak English?

ALVARO FOLGUEIRAS: Yeah, at some point in my very first practice at my high school I went to, you know, I wasn't playing really good on practice, and one of the coaches came to me saying, Wake up, whatever, you know, you're not doing good. He was kind of hard on me. And I put a face like he thought I was challenging him, but the truth is that I didn't know anything. I never talked with that guy in my life. So he didn't know that my face was because I wasn't understanding him.

And with that, a lot of things, a lot of things. But at the end of the day, you learn -- you come here to learn the universal language called basketball, you know. So I guess on that part, I learned even more than just a couple words in English.

BEN McCOLLUM: That's a part of him being life smart is acting like he doesn't understand me sometimes, kind of giving me that quizzical look.

ALVARO FOLGUEIRAS: Yeah, I got that card. I got that card.

BEN McCOLLUM: I don't understand you, Coach. Oh really, Al? Life smart. (Laughing).

Q. Last night, Illinois, not only their bigs rebounded and were aggressive in the paint, but Wagler had double-digit rebounds. How do you prevent some of their smaller guards or wing guys from getting in

there, especially when you're dealing with such a big front line?

BENNETT STIRTZ: I think we've all got to be ready to go. They crash five and they're the best rebounding team in the Big Ten. So we had some challenges last game and we definitely got to be ready to go and it starts with the bigs, but it also starts with the guards. Yeah, Keaton had, like, 12 rebounds so, me, Kael and the other guys, Tate, how we -- we really got to be ready to go and it's not even take one possession off, you got to do it every possession.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

Q. Your name has been connected to a couple of big jobs. Is it your intention to be the Hawkeyes head coach next year?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yes, whatever -- whatever -- whatever those are, somebody -- I think James warned me. Yeah, those are all lies. The only person that would ever know would be -- well, three people would be my athletic director, my wife, and that's about it. I guess two people (laughing).

Q. And you said today you wanted to be compared to Kirk Ferentz. He's a guy that's been at Iowa for 28 years, had a lot of success. What makes you want to live up to that comp?

BEN McCOLLUM: Well, I mean, why would I like the coach at Indiana? You know, like, we're cheering for the Hawkeyes here. That's why. No, Kirk's obviously the -- he's as classy as it gets. He's done a great job with his entire program of recruiting great kids and great people and created a great culture.

So, yeah, anytime can you compare yourself to that, it's a big deal. But I'm certainly not going to compare myself to somebody from Indiana. No disrespect. He obviously accomplished a lot of good things and certainly it's humbling, but I'm a Kirk guy.

Q. I'm sure you have a bunch because of how long you've been together, but do you have one story or moment with Bennett that illustrates the closeness you two guys have and how important he has been to you and you've been to him?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I mean -- a story? Yeah, probably -- you know, I think the interesting part about Bennett is his freshman year, he was very homesick. Like, he's an hour 15 away, and I can remember, you know, going into his sophomore year, and at the end of his

sophomore year, I was involved in a job and ended up getting the job, and I asked him at one point, I said, Well, what happens if I go somewhere? What would you want to do? And he is like, I'll go. And I'm like, Okay. What if it's somewhere else? What if it's Florida or somewhere random? Because he's kind of a homebody naturally. He said, I'll go.

And then I had to call his dad, and he said, Yeah, I think he's a little nervous about where you would go. But he just went. And even to Iowa -- you know, obviously, the way this portal works and the way all this NIL stuff works, some people were illegally recruiting him (laughing), offering him a lot more money, and he still chose to come to the University of Iowa.

I think that's probably as special as it gets, that he believes in you, and you believe in him. And I don't think either of us would be here without the other. So now we're in the Elite Eight and he's gone further than he ever has, even at Division II, and hopefully he can keep going further.

Q. Although you guys played Illinois earlier into the Big Ten schedule this year, how have you seen them kind of improve from that first matchup you had with them?

BEN McCOLLUM: I think just like anybody, they get more secure in who they are. Their role definition becomes a little bit better. I think they're very similar to what they were. I think they just defined it a little bit and sharpened it. They still run a heavy ball screen team, obviously try to put you in predicament with their mismatch, etcetera, and then try to get you in rotation off of that and do a really good job of it.

They obviously offensive rebound at an elite level. They're a very connected group. They're just a really good basketball team.

Q. Can you share some thoughts on the Big Ten representation in this regional in particular? And then add your thoughts on Coach Underwood and his path and journey.

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, going into the Big Ten, I was always curious as to what it was. I think that the nice part is a lot of these guys do have -- I guess the team we're about to play doesn't have as many four-year guys, but the Purdues of the world, the Michigan States have guys that have been in the program a little more consistently.

Then you've got really good coaching and obviously Coach Underwood did a great job of recruiting to his personnel. Wisconsin did a great job of that. A lot of these teams in

the Big Ten understand what they need, they understand who they are as coaches, and then they recruit to it, and they get the right players for their system. So it becomes very difficult.

The good part is it helped a lot of us in the tournament. I think sometimes it can hurt you too, just because you get beat up a little bit, maybe lose your confidence. It helped us from a process perspective and we continued to grow and get better and be better and better as long as we focused on that. The second question was what, again?

Q. (No microphone.)

BEN McCOLLUM: I had met him but -- not met him. I had called him one time. I think he was at Western Illinois maybe as an assistant. Does that sound right? He had been at a junior college maybe in Florida for a time. And then I think he bounced around maybe some Kansas JUCOs at one point. Then maybe K State. So I had called him maybe on a player, I feel like, when he was at Western Illinois and an assistant at the time, I believe he was an assistant there. And I got to know him through that. I probably don't know him that well. I think I talked to him then after he had won the national title. He's a life-long learner, and he was, he had called me on some stuff, like just short conversation. I think he pays attention to good basketball wherever he can find it. Obviously they have changed how they have been from where he was at Stephen F. Austin, to Oklahoma State, to where he is now. From an offensive perspective he's drastically changed, and I think that says a lot about his ability to learn and grow.

Q. I remember talking with you earlier this season you were talking about the ups and downs of experiencing a first full season of Big Ten basketball. What's it like to see a second familiar face in this NCAA tournament run?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I mean, this time of year it's like, Do you like your matchup? You know, no, I don't think anybody likes their matchup (laughing). No, I didn't like the Clemson matchup -- because everybody's good. So I don't know that -- I don't know. I mean, maybe an outside opponent's fun. I'm good with whoever we play. I'm glad to be here and excited about the opportunity to be able to play. Obviously they're a really good basketball team, but everybody -- if we were playing Houston they would be a good basketball team. We'll find out tomorrow if I really like the matchup or not.

Q. Earlier today I found an article about you posted by The Athletic five years ago, and kind of want to read it a little bit to you. It was when in your second season

at Northwest Missouri State, you were 28 at the time, I believe, and you guys were just coming off a loss to Truman State. You were on the way home, you called your mom and you said that you didn't think coaching was for you, that you wanted to quit. When she asked you what you told your team in a timeout, you said, Stop, stop playing so frustrated. And then in the moment you realized that you were coaching with negative energy, and that you needed to coach with positive energy. Once you realized that, that's when you took that corner. I guess, what is coaching with positive energy, what does that look like?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think the big thing, the lesson that I learned there was I think it was C.J. Moore that probably was, was that his article? The lesson that I learned was, I'm a big be the change you want to see in others. So if you want to see change, you better change. So it's not always just like just happy times. That doesn't necessarily mean you don't have to get on people, and you don't have to have some intensity. But when you coach with a high level of frustration -- and for that game I think my team was playing really frustrated at the time, and I wanted 'em to stop playing frustrated. I called 'em into the huddle and I told 'em, Stop playing so frustrated. And my mom asked me the question back, after I told her I was quitting coaching, and she said, she goes, Okay, say it to me how you said it to them. And I said, Stop playing so frustrated. And I'm like, Oh, I'm the problem, it's not them that's the problem. So we actually ended up finishing that season 6-3. Ended up winning at Fort Hays State, who was like top 10 in the country, had a 21-home game win streak. I was super positive. So a lot of that stuff comes from those seasons. A lot of the things that I share are from those couple seasons when we hit rock bottom, and about to quit coaching. Fortunately we finished 6-3, I had some kids stick with me, and the next year we won the league, and it was good. But be the change you want to see in others. If you want changes, then change yourself first.

Q. When you watch Illinois on defense especially in this tournament what are you seeing and what exactly stands out to you?

BEN McCOLLUM: Tall people. (Laughing). Seeing a lot of tall people. I mean, they have just got such elite length. Their length is elite. Honestly, probably the most unsung hero in their entire program is Boswell. I mean, he is the edge that they need, he's the alpha. I mean, he's good. He's physical, he gets down hill, he defends, he's got great energy. I think he is the leader of that defense. But they have got great length defensively. They're more keep you in front, they don't foul a lot than some of the other teams that we've played. But they obviously do a great job

defensively as well.

Q. Going back to last night, Nebraska had eight second-chance points in the first few minutes then the rest of the game you guys held them to just three. What were some of the defensive changes that you made to clean that up and make sure you limited their offensive boards?

BEN McCOLLUM: Man, I would like to say that, like I just made this huge adjustment and it was like, Man, I did that. It was, Do what we were supposed to do when we started the game. Box 'em out, please. And that was about it. That was the adjustment. I don't know, people always talk about these earth-shattering adjustments. Once you're in the game there's a few things that you can adjust to, but if you haven't worked on 'em it's not going to work on anyway. So those are things we work on daily in practice is boxing out. Even in the second half, they got a few O boards and we just were soft on our box outs. We weren't physical. Any time it was like, Hey, I felt like that was over the back. And the official is like, You got to box out a little bit stronger. That means you're playing soft. Because it just, we just weren't as physical as we needed to be boxing out. And then I thought we did a better job, after we gave up all those points of boxing out. Then we actually stopped fouling shooters too. That was really nice as well.

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