

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Ben McCollum

Bennett Stirtz

Postgame Press Conference



Ohio State 72, Iowa 69

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

BEN MCCOLLUM: First off, congrats to Ohio State. I thought they did a heck of a job today, particularly offensively. I thought they were really good.

We had a good game plan. I didn't think we executed it to that level. I actually thought our offense was better than expected. I think it was one point, two points per possession, which is quite a bit. They were, unfortunately, 1.24, which it's difficult to win that way.

I think we've got a good team. I think sometimes, we get ourselves to accept I don't know if it's second place, but accept good. I think that's a scary deal. I think we need to try to find great.

We're going to get there. We're going to keep fighting and, hopefully, do well in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Bennett, your reaction to hearing Coach say this team sometimes is okay with accepting second place.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Totally agree with him. Sometimes

BEN MCCOLLUM: Kind of. Not like completely they're a great team, first off, just to make sure I but go ahead, Bennett. Sorry.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Sometimes I think we believe that we're good, but our facial expressions say otherwise. I think he sees that. Yeah, you've just got to trust him with what he's saying. He's trying to make us better, and he's trying to make us win. You've got to listen to all the coaching staff.

Q. Bennett, you guys didn't face Tilly in the regular season. I'm just curious, what was it like playing against him and making the adjustments you guys did make in the second half to kind of slow him down a little bit?

BENNETT STIRTZ: He's a game changer. 7 footer who can spread the floor, and every time he gets in the pocket, he makes a good read. He makes them a lot better and definitely a tough cover.

Q. Bennett, it seemed like there was some missed opportunities in this game for you guys. How do you kind of address that through the upcoming week to prepare for the tournament?

BENNETT STIRTZ: I think the coaching staff said all they could. It starts with me. I've got to be a lot better and get the team going and be a leader. We've got a couple days, see where we play. Got to get a lot better in practice.

Q. What's it like preparing for these high stress games like the Big Ten tournament and the March Madness? What goes through your mind before the games, and how do you stay calm during?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Obviously, there's some nerves before the game, and once the ball tips, you don't feel any of that. You've got to just go play. Pressure is a privilege. You've got to embrace the challenge and embrace the environments you play in.

Q. Ben, what allowed Thornton to kind of get away there early in the second half and got him going?

BENNETT STIRTZ: He's a great player. I think we played a really good defense at Carver, at home, and he just was feeling it today. He's obviously a great player, but I thought it started with us, and our coverage wasn't that great.

Got to go back and watch the film and learn from it.

Q. Bennett, you kind of already took my question.



Obviously, Bruce Thornton had 10 the first time around, this time he had 24. What do you feel is the difference with his game the this time around versus the first one?

BENNETT STIRTZ: I think he was just feeling it. He saw his first shot go in, and from there on, he was getting good looks. He was hitting some tough shots. He's a great player, and it's going to be tough to guard him anyway.

Q. I wanted to ask you about that last sequence where you got the timeout, you're down three, 7 seconds left, and Haasen takes that 3 coming out of the timeout. Was that the play you wanted, or what were you trying to get coming out of that timeout?

BEN MCCOLLUM: Kind of. We knew they were going to get Bennett the ball and we knew they were going to foul because they were screaming. To be honest, I think they tried to foul him. I'd have to go back and watch it, but I think they tried to foul him. That's why he shot that. So it looked worse than it actually was. You'll see the kid reach it and kind of shove him. And so he shot it, knowing he was going to get fouled.

It was actually a pretty crafty move. It looked worse, but like looking back on it, it was a pretty vet move. We knew we were going to have a tough time getting Bennett open, and if we did get him open, they were going to foul the other way. So you run him off that side, ran Brandon off the other side, and then Tate in the middle. We were just trying to get them to foul us for the most part, and then if they reached in, we were going to try to get a shot off and get three free throws.

Q. Talk about the start. You commented yesterday how you guys are kind of known for slow starts. Today you get off to an 8 2 start. You were holding them to, I think it was 14 percent, through maybe 10 field goal attempts, 11 field goal attempts, whatever it was. Just talk about that start, and what was the key there?

BEN MCCOLLUM: I thought we had a really good scout. I thought our offense was really clicking, we were getting in and out of things better, actually screening bodies. I thought the second wave of guys probably weren't as tuned in as they needed to be. Even our energy coming out wasn't elite.

Like I said before, we have to have elite energy when we come into games. It's just the nature of how we're built. That's just is what it is this year. If we're at 97 percent, it ain't going to be good enough in the Big Ten. We've got to be at 100.

I thought our execution was good to start. I didn't think our effort was elite, but I thought it was good enough to be able to sustain that early start.

Q. Bennett said that your post game message was mostly about how you believe in the team and that maybe he feels like sometimes they don't totally believe in themselves. What is it going to take over the next few days to get it to the point where they fully believe in what they're capable of doing?

BEN MCCOLLUM: I think there's probably a couple different things there. I think, one, sometimes you can, one, listen to the noise, or you can just walk out on the floor and see the differences in body types. They're a little bit bigger than us, obviously. In every game, it looks that way, and even games where we win or dominate, it's just the nature of how we're built.

That doesn't mean you're not good or better than your opponent. So trying to get them to understand that you're not just a win a conference tournament game team, you're not just a make the NCAA Tournament team, you need to be able to win those games.

I think often, this is why people sit in mediocrity for a long time because they start to fall in love with really good. I probably had that happen to me when I was in, like, my seventh or eighth year. We went to three straight Sweet 16s and lost by one, two points. I don't remember the exact scores. And I always thought we were really good and close.

Then I realized that was the biggest issue that we had, was the fact that we were settling for really good. I want our guys to understand that just because you've accomplished some things and everybody wants to compare it to last year, and I just don't do that. Last year is last year. The last coaching staff is the last coaching staff. I have zero interest in comparing the two, and I don't want our guys to either. We've got to compare ourselves to ourselves, and we can be better than that.

So kind of summing that up, trying to go from really good to being great is something that is really hard to do, and our kids need to understand really good is not acceptable. It's actually worse than being bad. I always cringe when I see coaches like especially new coaches, they finish like fourth place in their league because they never ever get a championship. Very rarely do you finish fourth and then win first place eventually because you don't hit rock bottom.

That was the benefit of my first two years is, we hit rock



bottom, and it's like, dude, I don't like that anymore. I like to finish first. So then you finish first. Then you do that a few times and you get really good, and it's like, okay, I like this feeling, but do I like it too much. Then all of a sudden, the next year, you win a national title. That's kind of a long answer to a short question, sorry.

Q. I'll ask you the same thing I asked Bennett, but just with those missed opportunities, how do you guys as a coaching staff kind of address that in preparation for the NCAA Tournament next week?

BEN MCCOLLUM: Missed opportunities in regards to being able to win this game or missed layups?

Q. Both.

BEN MCCOLLUM: We were 6 for 13 at the rim, so that's a problem. Need to be about 10 for 13, but that's not what I think you're totally asking.

I don't necessarily view it as a missed opportunity per se. I probably view it as we're still trying to improve and get better in the process, but not accepting any not lack of effort. We still played pretty hard. It's just like we've just got to get to 100 percent consistently to be able to win those games.

Q. You held them 1 of 7 through their first 7 in the first 10 minutes, and then they shot 20 of 25 over the next 20 minutes. What did they change offensively that gave you guys fits in between the end of the first half and the start of the second half, and then what can you say about Isaia's effort to get that rebound and shot up at the end?

BEN MCCOLLUM: I don't think they changed a whole lot, to be honest. I think they were running mostly the same stuff. I think over time, if you're not at 100, it's going to kind of wear on you, and eventually, they'll get good looks.

So it wasn't necessarily they changed. It's just they were pretty tuned in to things. We were too. It wasn't like we were awful. It was just, man, we've got to be 100. It's just the nature of what we are.

Q. My question piggy backs off Ethan's. 10 of Ohio State's 12 made field goals in the first half were dunks or layups.

BEN MCCOLLUM: I'm aware.

Q. 29 of their 34 points were dunks, layups, or free throws. You can't be happy with that. Kind of expanding on what Ethan said, I guess. Around the

rim, what was going on?

BEN MCCOLLUM: You would think we were trying to take away the 3s, wouldn't you? Our whole game plan was to keep it out of the paint ironically.

So a lot of different things. Three of them were gambles. We gambled for three steals. One was off of a switch. So we switched, they set a flare screen instead of going to the man and switching that. We gambled for a steal, waved at the ball, they dove, Coop had to help up, they dunked.

Second one, we tried to gamble for a pass on the perimeter to their 7 footer. He just drove to the perimeter. So three of those were gambles.

I think the other three were busted coverage and ball screen, meaning we're in a certain coverage on different guys. One of their guys is really good at passing to the pocket or passing to the big. So on his, we weren't supposed to be so aggressive, and we certainly weren't supposed to come up after he was already set. We came up after he was already set. We didn't have our tag set, and they dunked it.

Then another one another two were off of and two were off of pin downs. You're supposed to top lock the pin downs, and we didn't top lock the pin downs. It was probably a lack of execution more so than anything else.

Is that descriptive enough for you?

Probably just not executing the scout.

Then the second half, they got us on some down screens where we didn't have the matchup that we typically like. We switched when we shouldn't have switched, and just a few things like that. Just some things where you just got to talk through some things, and we just didn't do that today.

Again, it's not the end of the world. We're excited about the NCAA Tournament. We're going to fight there too. That's just what we're going to do.

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