

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Drake vs Missouri

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

Drake Bulldogs Bennett Stirtz Mitch Mascari

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have the Drake University Bulldogs. On the dais is Bennett Stirtz and Mitch Mascari. Questions, please.

Q. Bennett, I'm curious, growing up in Liberty, how many friends, family members, and what ties you might have had to Mizzou growing up?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I really didn't have many ties. Both of my parents went to K-State, and all three of my brothers went to K-State as well. There's a K-State tie.

After we got matched up with Mizzou, a lot of friends texted me. A lot of people from my high school went to Mizzou. I would say those are some ties.

Q. For both of you, how do you guys go into games where you might have a size disadvantage that you probably have in this one? What is the alternate version of how you kind of handle that going into this matchup?

MITCH MASCARI: It's more so just doing what we do on defense. You know, we're pretty active with our hands. We're pretty physical. We like to box out and get them out and let our rebounders get a board.

When it comes down to size, you can only control what you can control. When it comes down to it, it's just our habits that we need to focus on.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I think we've been dealing with it all year. We're pretty undersized. We're used to it.

We had a good, strong nonconference schedule. So we played teams like Vandy, K-State. We were undersized



there. I would say we're used to it, and yeah, it's going to be a physical game. We'll be ready for it.

Q. For both of you as well, how did that experience St. Louis at the Missouri Valley tournament kind of prep you guys for what this tournament will bring to you?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, the Missouri Valley Conference is a great conference, and I think it feels like underappreciated sometimes. There's really good teams in it.

Yeah, just playing in a big arena too, I think that helps a little bit. Just helps us get acclimated just to the scene. We know Mizzou fans are going to bring it, and it should be a good atmosphere on Thursday.

MITCH MASCARI: Yeah, I think just playing in that atmosphere, like Bennett said. People say that we might have gotten an at-large, we might have not, but to us we don't really think about that. High stakes, high reward kind of thing. That's what it is this weekend as well.

Q. On both ends of the floor what needs to happen for you guys to get a result against Missouri?

MITCH MASCARI: I think it's really just listening to Coach. We have some of the best coaches in the country, and I think they're going to put us in the right position to be effective on offense and defense.

Like Bennett said earlier, we've played some high-talented teams back in Charleston and K-State, so it's really just focussing on what we do and imposing our will.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I think it's just we're going to have to play our game. Obviously the SEC is the best conference in the nation. Mizzou will be ready to go. They play really physical. They try to speed you up, things like that.

So I would say just play at our speed, not get sped up, and play calm.

Q. Talk about, Bennett, you said, "We have to play our game and play within ourselves." How do you stay calm and stay in the moment?



BENNETT STIRTZ: Probably just being in the moment like that. I feel like Coach Mac will put us in the position, and he has been this whole week, just getting us prepared. Like in practice we're having the music blare loud.

So just trying to put us in positions similar like that.

MITCH MASCARI: We've been preparing for it all week. Yeah, we have three different speakers playing three different songs, heavy metal. If you can be calm under that, I think the crowd noise is going to be all right.

Q. Bennett, you say you need to not get sped up. As the guy with the ball in your hands, what goes into that? I mean, how do you avoid that happening in a game?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, obviously I have the ball in my hands a lot of the game, but just trusting my teammates. I've been used to it, just getting trapped most of the season, stuff like that. Knowing that I'm not the only guy out there, I trust my teammates.

They'll put me in the right positions, and I'll try and put them in the right positions. Also, just trust the coaching staff. They'll obviously put me in the right positions as well.

Q. What's it like one year ago you were in Maryville at Northwest Missouri State and coming here with Coach, and now you're in the NCAA Tournament. What's that year been like for both of you?

MITCH MASCARI: It's been pretty surreal. This was obviously a dream of ours when we decided to come to Drake, so to be here it's been a lot of fun.

We've actually been practicing at Newman University, which is in the MIAA, so it's kind of been a full circle thing going from Newman to this arena. But it's been a lot of fun, and we have a lot more work to do.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, D2 basketball is pretty good, but it's still pretty crazy that we're in this moment. Yeah, just being in March Madness could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

So I think just trying to take it all in and just resident the journey. Yeah, just take it all in.

Q. Can you guys both speak to Tavion's growth and improvement throughout the whole year? I know he's elevating the program as the season goes on.

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I can speak to Tavion and Isaia

Howard, guys like that. First-year guys in Mac's program. Everyone took a huge step. It was great seeing their process throughout the year. Just seeing their confidence grow up a little bit was pretty special to see.

MITCH MASCARI: We've known it ever since we got to camp that these guys were going to be special. It was just a matter of when and how they buy into Mac's culture and Mac's system. So to see them really flourish at the right time has been really cool to watch.

Q. Especially with a lot of you guys being from Missouri, is there anything extra going into this game playing against the biggest school in the state?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, so there's I think six guys from Kansas City on the team. I don't say there's a little -- there's not any extra pressure or motivation, stuff like that, but it's pretty cool seeing that we're playing Mizzou.

Yeah, I wouldn't say extra pressure, but it's also cool. We have one guy from Wichita too, so he's back home. I know Caleb Grill is back home as well. It's pretty cool that both teams are trying to stay -- or get to stay a little closer to home. Hopefully that brings some more fans out as well.

MITCH MASCARI: I'm not from Missouri, so it's not really that special to me. I have some friends that went to Mizzou, but other than that, they're pretty excited.

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