

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

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

## Drake Bulldogs Ben McCollum

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Head Coach of the Drake Bulldogs, coach of the year, Ben McCollum is here. Opening statement from Coach.

BEN McCOLLUM: Obviously we're excited to be in the NCAA Tournament. In taking this job, we wanted to play in the Division I NCAA Tournament, and we didn't know how quickly it would come. Fortunately it came year one.

I think so often people get really excited about making it, and we are. Obviously we want to be able to compete in it as well and try to win a game or two or whatever you can and try to fight our way into one of those.

As far as our team goes, we're a smaller team in regards to the amount of people. We've got 12 kids, one of which is a medical redshirt and two are redshirting. We have nine kids essentially on our roster that can play. It's by design. Our whole objective was to get our culture set early with tough kids. We always felt like that could create the results that we obviously created this year.

We've prepared for this week. We've had a good week and a half of practice, and we're definitely excited to be able to play in this environment.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. I know you've had a group of Northwest Missouri State fans and a lot of people from Maryville come up and support that program and have really been bought in in your first year. What's that support meant to you from the school that you were at prior?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think it means a lot, especially to our kids. I think the reason people do support is because of the personnel that we have in our program. Obviously the four kids specific to the Maryville people that



have supported us with Daniel, Isaia, Bennett, and Mitch, you know, they're as good of kids as there is. They're easy to support. They're easy to cheer for. That's why those people came up.

I would like to say it was just because they like me so much, but I'm not that cool (laughing). It's been awesome. The entire Des Moines has embraced them, but again, those kids are pretty easy to embrace. They're special people.

**Q. As far as pace and tempo of this game goes, you guys tend to be a team that's on the more patient end of the spectrum, while Missouri, your players were saying, tries to speed you up. Just what do you see as the tension there and how that element could play out tomorrow?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I like how you worded that. Some people would say slow. Yeah, no, "patient tempo." I'm going to use that from now on.

I've explained this a few times. It's not that we try to slow it down. It's that it is difficult for us to get a shot because of the athleticism on the other side of the ball.

Certain games we're able to play a little bit faster and have more possessions. Obviously Mizzou, I don't know, defensively they run quite a few defenses. You kind of just have to take what they give you. If it's five seconds in, and you need to shoot it. If it's 25 seconds in, then shoot it.

Our intent isn't necessarily to just slow the game down per se. Obviously the SEC is a fast league and an athletic league. Mizzou is very athletic. They play very fast. They're very well-coached. They're a tough matchup for everybody in the country, to be quite honest.

**Q. Could you just talk about the double-edged sword that the transfer portal presents in terms of job security and confidence as coach in terms of you can rebuild a program very quickly, have success in year one like you did, and can turn around the program like they did, and then also having that just shorter patience maybe from athletic staffs with that?**

BEN McCOLLUM: A lot there to unpack. The transfer



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portal -- I was affected by it once. We had a kid go to Creighton. It was during the COVID season. He had played five years for us. Obviously we benefitted from it this year where kids could transfer.

I think with a coaching change I always think kids should be able to transfer. I just think that's -- a lot of kids do go to play for a coach.

As far as job security or just maintaining a culture, I think it's probably trickier than ever. I do still think that relationships do matter, but there is the NIL component of it that makes it tricky as well where somebody I always said, hey, money isn't everything, but it's something. You can't ask a kid that can go make X amount of dollars to just stay with you for shockingly less. If it's close, then yeah, that should happen.

The hardest part with the transfer portal is probably the exact -- you know, it's almost the exact opposite of why I would have gotten into this profession. I think when you coach kids and sometimes you have to coach them hard, and sometimes you have to make them super uncomfortable. Sometimes you have to discipline them. When they have a crutch or what is known as an out, if it doesn't go their way, naturally as a coach -- and I don't, but naturally as most coaches, you might not discipline that kid one time. You might not do that because it's going to benefit you, but it's not going to benefit that kid.

I think that's where the kids are kind of disserved essentially because we don't get to coach them as much. We don't get to make them better people as much because they just move. It's not a kid problem necessarily. A lot of it's just an adult problem we need to fix more so than anything else. Long answer, but it's a loaded question.

**Q. A couple of years ago when Grant McCasland became a coach at Texas Tech your name was brought up as potentially joining the staff. How close was that, and ultimately what kind of decided against that for you?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Grant is one of my really close friends, and obviously Jeff Linder too and Luke and Choki and all those guys.

You know, there's been opportunities for those kind of jobs throughout. Specific to that one, probably doesn't help me to say one way or the other, but he's probably one of the few people in the world that I would work for because he's that good of human being, and he is. He's a great coach.

But outside of that, you know, I probably wanted to stay a head coach. That's why I didn't pursue a lot of those

opportunities throughout my career.

**Q. What do you hope that you, your team, says about the level of players and coaching that there are at all levels of college basketball, from D2 up to here and even below?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, obviously at this level there's -- this is a bad way to say it -- there's more better players or more good players at the midmajor level, at obviously the high major level. There are still good players and good college basketball players and good college teams at the Division II level, at the Division III level and all the way through high school for that matter.

If you are coaching one of those or if you are playing at one of those, it's still ultimately -- the purpose of basketball and college basketball for me is to still kind of change people's lives through the game of basketball. Well, you can still do that at all those levels.

Naturally I do think there's good players. I do think there's good players that can advance, but part of that is, part of going back to the transfer portal deal, is it's speed dating in the transfer portal, so you never know who could actually play. People panic and take the wrong kids. Those kids transfer. Guys like myself will look at somebody and trust their own eyes and take their eyes and a Bennett Stirtz. Then all of a sudden it work out for us.

**Q. I asked Bennett this and Mitch and was curious your answer. What's this last year been like going from Maryville at Northwest Missouri State to now coming to Drake, having the success you guys have had, and now at the NCAA Tournament?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, hard. You know, for me personally you move your whole family. You're at a place for 15 years that you loved, and you kind of had everything rolling.

In saying that, sometimes I think you have to experience hard to grow and to essentially thrive and make yourself a better person, make yourself a better coach. It ended up working out great. Now it's obviously a lot more fun when you win games, but I still think the growth would have come regardless of winning or losing games.

So it's been a year that I will always remember. I want to continue this year, though, so I don't want to necessarily get nostalgic or look back. You know, you would be lying to say if winning isn't hard. It looks really cool and really fun and this is the coolest story ever, but there are some tough days there. I'm proud of our kids for fighting through them.



**Q. You mentioned earlier, Missouri can play defense in a lot of different ways. I'm curious what goes into preparing for a team that can give you a lot of different looks like that?**

BEN McCOLLUM: A lot. You can't overthink it, though, meaning I think a lot of it is to try to stymie you for two, three possessions at a time. Maybe you score a couple of times in man or they go to their 1-1-3 or 2-3 or whatever they call it. Maybe they'll press with their diamond press or something man press or trap you at half court or blitz ball screens on occasion or switch ball screens. They'll tag from certain places and not tag from others.

You can kind of get down a rabbit hole trying to figure it out. A lot of it just comes back to conceptual basketball of just playing the right way, move the basketball, you know, do what we've done all season long and keep it pretty simple.

**Q. I know you haven't been asked about this at all in the past few days, but your name comes up a lot in coaching conversations. What would you kind of say in regards to that? Then, two-part, how do you keep the focus on your team and this tournament right now?**

BEN McCOLLUM: You know, some of those rumors have been around for six, seven, eight years. I mean, it's just the nature of having a level of success. It's kind of a gift and a curse, I guess.

I've tried and over years you've learned how to not have a divided heart and to focus everything on the team that you have. That's what I'll continue to do is focus all my attention on this team.

That's what I've done. That's what I did for seven, eight years at Northwest Missouri State. Then eventually we made the move to Drake. That's what I'll continue to do here outside of -- I haven't taken six jobs at this point. According to social media, I probably have, though.

Yeah, just focus on this is a great accomplishment, and this is a great team. I just refuse to have a divided heart in regards to that.

**Q. Dating back to the Emporia State days, how did Coach Moe empower you? How important was that in your coaching career? Then, second part, Emporia State players, they want to know if you still run 20 in 20s in practice?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Second part, yes, we still do that. It was harder to get them to fail this year, and that 20 in 20 is

absolutely -- I ran 20 in 20 once for a bet. I won't say what I bet, but I bet, and we won, and I made it.

The first question was David Moe empowered. That's a good word to use that. A lot of times he just said, Go do it. He empowered me to drive the bus too, empowered me to do all the scouts and empowered me to do a lot of the recruiting. I was empowered.

But, no, honestly from an offensive basketball perspective and a personnel perspective one of the smartest people I've ever been around because his dad, Doug, obviously those two are just basketball geniuses. It just clicks for them. They just kind of get it. So I learned offensive side of the ball just from an efficiency perspective what kind of players wins games, how do you define roles, et cetera.

Then I also learned a level of loyalty from him where he's a very loyal person to me. Still is to this day. I'll get a random text or a call, and I know when that call comes, it's going to be an hour and a half conversation. He's going to tell me how to coach, but it's a beautiful thing.

He was great to me, and the city of Emporia was one of my favorite places to live. It's an awesome place too.

**Q. I was wondering, you talked about the SEC being a fast and physical and athletic league. You guys have had a run-in with Vanderbilt and the SEC. What can you take away from that game in particular that allows you to prepare for this one?**

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I mean, it was so early that I'm not sure we can take a ton from it. I think Vanderbilt is athletic. I think Mizzou is a little bit higher level of athlete than Vandy. I think Vandy is probably a little bit different in regards to just efficiency.

I mean, Mizzou is just a different level of power and physicality and athleticism and all those things. You can't really simulate that unless I got out there. Maybe I could simulate some of their athletes. I bet you don't believe me there.

No, it's hard to simulate that stuff. You just have to have a plan and hope the plan works. If it does, it does. You just have to put your best foot forward and try to compete and fight. I think our guys will do that.

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