

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

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

Drake Bulldogs
Ben McCollum
Bennett Stirtz
Mitch Miscari

Media Conference

Drake 67, Missouri 57

THE MODERATOR: The Missouri Valley Conference champion Drake Bulldogs are with us. Head Coach Ben McCollum is in the middle here. Bennett Stirtz and Mitch Miscari are here as well. We'll ask for an opening statement from Coach.

BEN McCOLLUM: First off, it might sound cliché, but it's fact, you know, Missouri didn't win a game in conference last year, and then they completely flipped it and got to the NCAA Tournament. Obviously a high seed. I have a lot of respect for Dennis Gates and his staff and his players and even scouting them I knew it was going to be an incredible challenge to be able to compete with them. But he's one of the good guys in the business, and their program is doing it the right way. I certainly appreciate that.

For our guys, I think we just fought. That's kind of what we have to do is just continue to fight and continue to grind and continue to compete. We've got guys that want to do that, that want it hard. They were able to do it.

Really proud of their effort. Really proud of their execution. Everybody that came in and everybody on the bench, it was certainly a fun atmosphere to be a part of.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. I think there were some questions about your depth, especially compared to Missouri's bench. Can you talk about how Tavion and Isaia Howard kind of stepped up tonight?



BEN McCOLLUM: Depth, for me it's one of the most overrated things. What does depth mean? That you can play ten guys and then five guys don't get in rhythm? I'm a believer that if there's separation, and usually good teams have separation between one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, that you've got to keep with guys so that they maintain a rhythm.

So I don't think we've ever been afraid of fatigue or afraid of a depth issue, if that makes sense. It's probably just my own personal opinion more so than anything else because we played two guys 40 minutes, and our shooter was 1 for 4. Golly. He had four steals. All of a sudden you're a defender, big boy. He might have been the worst defender I've ever recruited. Now he's fantastic, to be honest with you. He's fantastic defensively. He has a good coach. That's a joke, but go ahead.

Q. Hey Ben, I just wondered, the game got pretty chaotic there with maybe about four minutes to go or so when Missouri is making its run. It seemed from the outside that Bennett is just very calm in those situations. Obviously you've been coaching him for a long time now. What is it about those moments and what do you see from him to react to maybe those more chaotic times in a game?

BEN McCOLLUM: He's been in a lot of big games. Obviously just from a personality perspective that's probably why we match so well. I'm a little more intense, we'll use. Some people would call it crazy. He's very calm. We just kind of fit each other when he's on the floor. He can evaluate exactly what I'm saying so we can get it corrected.

I thought all of our guys maintained a level of poise. The thing that we didn't give up is when we did turn it over, we sprinted back. Those are the tough ones. Like, the ones that no one else thinks you should get, like the stops that no one thinks you should get, those are the ones we got. We got defensive rebounds, and that's just the toughness of our kids.

Q. Bennett, I wonder if you could take us through, there's about seven, eight seconds on the shot clock where you hit that running three. Can you walk us through that play?



BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, I don't really know what I was doing there. I knew the shot clock was late, and I kind of just threw it up. I didn't really know I did it off one leg, and luckily, it went in. So, yeah, it was fun.

Q. Mac, you've been doing this for a long time now. More people watched this game than have watched any of your previous games. What's it mean to see your team perform and kind of play the way they've been playing for years now on the biggest stage?

BEN McCOLLUM: From my perspective I think that -- again, it's probably the reason you do it, is the stage allows you to pass a message, which is tough kids, connected kids, kids that love each other and serve each other still can win. Kids that maintain a level of loyalty, kids that are just awesome to be around can still win.

As far as the whole world seeing, from my perspective, I get a lot of joy just me seeing it, to be honest. I'm pretty selfish with that. I love seeing these guys every day. I love going to practice. I think there's a level of memories and things that you go through that nothing can replace, so I'm pretty selfish with that.

It's good that other people see it. That's our message, but for me it doesn't mean anything more than just an empty gym.

Q. Coach, what was your message to the team after you called the timeout following Missouri's 9-0 run?

BEN McCOLLUM: Oh, I don't remember. Do you remember? Was it a good message? Must have been a good one.

I don't know. I thought that it got a little sped up maybe, and I think I probably simplified is my guess. I probably simplified what we were doing offensively to break some of those presses and traps.

Also, wanted to stop a run. I knew I was going to probably burn all my time-outs by the end. I was a little concerned that I would have to burn them in the first half, burn two or three, which I'm not afraid to do in those situations, just to keep the game calm and under control. My guess is that's probably why I called it, and I probably didn't have any earth-shatteringly good things to say other than just let's just play really hard, that kind of stuff. That's kind of what I say (laughing).

Q. Ben, this time of year a year ago you hadn't even taken this job, and tonight you've got a tournament win. You have people behind you dressed up like you,

which I'm sure you've noticed. You mentioned the joy before. Does the impact or the weight of what you have accomplished and this team has accomplished in less than a year register for you yet? Can you have that perspective at this point?

BEN McCOLLUM: You know, maybe in a couple of years I might reflect back on it. I would be lying if I didn't say I didn't expect it. I expected it. That's what I expected. I expected exactly this. I expected them to compete. I brought winners with me. Like, that's what I brought.

I guess my super power is finding winners, finding tough kids, and believing in them. So I kind of expected this. I did. I would be lying if I said I didn't. I know I've tried to be humble in other ones, but man, I believe in these kids.

Q. Coach, the turnovers were pretty similar, the margin, but you guys scored ten more points off turnovers than Missouri. What was it how you guys were able to stop them in transition and take advantage of the turnovers you created?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think a few we just threw out of bounds, so that's part of them probably. A couple of travels here or there. Then the other ones, that's exactly the margins that you have to win in. That's exactly it, is you have to -- the stops that no one else thinks you should get, like those turnover pick sixes, those are the ones you need to get. If you just get a few of those that the other team doesn't want to get or won't fight for, you win in the margin there.

That's what our kids do, is they turn it over -- we work on it constantly just going from thing to thing to thing constantly in practice, and that's a next-play mentality. So they just go from thing to thing very, very quickly.

Q. I was curious if you saw Dolph (Pulliam) in the background and a lot of '68', '69, '70 Drake graduates traveling around. What do you think of the passion of the fan base and seeing them go crazy and dress up like you? What did you think of that?

BEN McCOLLUM: I think it's awesome. It's not that they dress up like me. A lot of them have more hair than I do. Dolph looks good, doesn't he, in that tie?

It's cool. They take a lot of pride. That specific -- those specific years and particularly Dolph, he takes a lot of pride in Drake being really good. He spoke to our team in the preseason. It was about as entertaining as I've ever heard some of the stories that he told me. They were fantastic.

It means a lot. It means a lot that all of Des Moines comes



down here. We're going to need them again here on Saturday.

Q. People in the past have called your team's tempo and pace of play patient and the patience brought Missouri its lowest scoring half of the season. What does that say to how important buying into a system is as far as building a college basketball team?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, sometimes our defense slows tempo too. It's hard to get a good shot against us as well. So there's a kind of 50/50 deal where we have a tough time getting a shot sometimes because we don't have as much shooting as most, but the opponent does too. It naturally slows the game down and creates low possessions. Then we value possessions.

Again, our teams in the past probably shot it considerably better. We shot it today. We had five guys that shot 40-plus percent from three. This team just had to adapt to what they are, and this is who we are. We have to play the way we play. We're just trying to just be tough. I mean, that's how we win basketball games.

Q. Mitch, I know you've been asked the retirement question so many times now, but 12 months ago you thought you were done with college basketball. How does it feel to be sitting where you are sitting right now?

MITCH MASCARI: It feels good. But kind of like Mac said, I expected this. This is why I came back. I knew that this was a possibility for us. Having Mac as a coach and his ability to not only find good players, but get everybody together and fight for each other, it's really special.

Q. Mac, not to look too far ahead, but if Texas Tech were to win, you would get the matchup with one of your best friends. Obviously not trying to jinx them or anything at this point, but what would that be like to you to play a March Madness game against Texas Tech?

BEN McCOLLUM: It would be great. He's going to try to beat us. We would try to beat him. It's all love. It's just like playing pick-up with your teammates. When you are playing pick-up, sometimes you kind of get after each other a little bit, but afterwards it's all love.

I mean, he is a competitor now, and his whole staff is too. I feel like we've got competitors too. He's one of the best there is, and it would be an honor to play them.

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