

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - FDU vs Iowa

Friday, March 20, 2026

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Carver-Hawkeye Arena

## FDU Knights

## Coach Stephanie Gaitley

## Kailee McDonald

## Ava Renninger

Media Conference



out and play and follow our standards. So I think we'll be good.

**Q. What has been the key to this season and why have you been able to put together a run like this?**

AVA RENNINGER: I think it's our team chemistry, one. We work on that in the offseason. And in the season we're always together. And we love being with each other. I think that's a big part of it.

We also focus a lot on our defense and rebounding. I think if you're not shooting well, that's what it takes to win a game. And I think that's our main focus point throughout the whole season. That's what's gotten us here.

**Q. For people that aren't familiar with your style of play or haven't been able to see you play a lot, how would you define your style of basketball and what can fans expect to see from you guys tomorrow?**

KAILEE MCDONALD: So our defense and rebounding, we focus on that a lot. Obviously we're No. 2 in the country for our defense. So we take pride in it. And tomorrow we're going to go out and play defense and give it our best shot.

AVA RENNINGER: I would agree. We also like to shoot a lot of 3s, aka Kailee, Madlena, myself and Reese. We get a lot of shots up, if they play off of us, I trust all our shooters on the court.

If that doesn't work, we'll go inside/out but I trust all of us the way we play. But we will push in transition and we will get our shooters open.

**Q. From a player's perspective, how much are you looking forward to the atmosphere tomorrow? 15,000 fans, sold-out crowd, how much from your standpoint do you guys look forward to that?**

AVA RENNINGER: I think we're extremely excited. Me and Kailee weren't here the year they played Iowa. I think we're excited to get on the court and kind of feel that atmosphere. It's a once-in-a-lifetime kind of opportunity and we're excited.

**Q. What is the challenge for playing Iowa and what you've seen out of them in preparing for this game?**

AVA RENNINGER: I think we talked about it in the scout. They're a pretty big team. They like to go inside a lot. We're not one of the biggest teams inside. But we're just working how we're going to work them defensively, obviously double down if we need to. But just make sure we have a lot of help side, being there to help the bigs out on guarding their bigs because that's where they like to go.

KAILEE MCDONALD: Obviously they're big they like to run in transition. I think that's something we'll have to focus on is getting back in transition, running, doubling the post and getting out on shooters.

**Q. You guys have won a lot of games in a row. How does that winning streak give you guys confidence coming into the tournament no matter who you're playing or what the situation is?**

AVA RENNINGER: It gives us a lot of confidence. Obviously we know how to win. We know how to win basketball games, close games. If it's a big margin or not, we know how to come out with a win, obviously.

We don't talk about the streak a lot but we carry it with pride and we want to win. So we know how to come into a game and we know how to win in tight situations. And we practice that a lot, so I think we're prepared winning or we're just being prepared if it's a close game or not.

KAILEE MCDONALD: I think we prepare a lot in practice. We never really talk about the winning streak. We just go



STEPHANIE GAITLEY: It's exciting to be back in Iowa. This is where I started my career with FDU, the first game. Met Caitlin Clark in the hallway, got a picture taken with her. My sons were destroying me, like, mom, you can't post a picture with the team and Caitlin Clark. Your team will kill you. I'm, like, I'm not going to post it, don't worry.

But that was an incredible experience and at that point that was a team that really hadn't found its identity yet. My husband was kidding me this morning. He goes, listen, they had the predictors at 1 percent that game. You have 2 percent chance of this game. So we've doubled our chances. Excited about that.

Excited to be here. Jan does an incredible job. I saw where Iowa is the nation's favorite team in women's basketball. Sold-out arena. We have a team that's coming off a great season with kids that work really, really hard. We're young, and we're looking forward to the opportunity.

**Q. What do you see out of Iowa and what sort of challenges do they present for you guys?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: Size. I mean, they're just really big and strong inside. They're also are balanced outside. They have shooters and they have great point guards. So their balance is really, really strong.

And they run the floor hard. It's not like they're bigs that are slow getting up and down the court. I mean, they work really, really hard. Jan has always been known as a post-player coach. And they do a fantastic job of really getting deep in the lane. So that's going to be a big challenge for us.

**Q. You mentioned your first game here and the memories. What did it feel like walking back in here from the start of a coaching career at FDU to now? What's the emotions like?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: It's different when you're coming in to start your season as opposed to knowing what you just accomplished. That year, when I took that team over -- I thank Brad for giving me the opportunity, our athletic director -- I got the job in late April. At that point, we had five players returning.

So we were going to get in May by the time we got involved in recruiting, we were getting kids that were still in the portal for two months and high school kids that weren't being recruited. So I always say it was like, if anybody's ever watched "Rudolph," it was like Misfit Island. It's like I don't know what we're -- we really didn't know.

I mean, we started off the out-of-conference 2 and 13 and then we did pretty well in conference. And that whole team returned, which as you know, in these day and ages is a little unusual. And that whole team returned and that's where it started.

And so I think the difference now is you came with a deer-in-the-headlights in that first game because it's, like, all you knew was Caitlin Clark and the success of Iowa basketball. And now you see how good they still are. Obviously Jan's continued what Lisa's done, but I think we're coming in with a different mindset because of the success we've had.

**Q. What can you tell your players about competing inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: We make a point in the beginning of the season and in our out-of-conference games, like, last year we went to UConn and this year was Notre Dame, Purdue and Rutgers. I think those type of games are important to get the kids ready so that if we do get this opportunity we're not taken aback by the crowd.

They know it's going to be -- especially the juniors who played here -- know what the environment's going to be like. And we've done well on the road. So obviously not in these circumstances, don't get me wrong.

But at the same time, I think we were a really different team when we played Notre Dame and Purdue. We really didn't know what we were yet, really, really young -- real young.

So I think the kids are excited about the challenge. I don't think we're coming in with like deer in the headlights just not knowing what to expect, because I think at TCU last year, we held our own up until halftime and then their talent kind of took over.

But it's interesting because there's different pieces this year to see, between the freshmen and sophomore, how they're going to respond to the challenge.

**Q. How much confident does your team have considering the record you've had and this long winning streak? How confident is your team right now?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: I mean, I think obviously they're very confident in the sense -- but they're realistic, too. They know women's basketball, and they know the challenges ahead of them. But like I said, I think because of the fact of the success we had, we've had games where we started down. We've had games where we struggled

shooting. I go back to our semifinal game, and we had one of our poorest shooting games of the year. We won by 30 because we played really, really good defense and we limited them to one shot. Now granted, the size of those kids were nowhere near the size of the kids of Iowa.

So I think the kids know what the challenge is ahead. We tried to play eight five-minute games and try to piece it that way, rather than saying, hey, it's a 40-minute game. Yeah, we know it's a 40-minute game, but let's go five minutes at a time.

**Q. For people that might not be familiar with your style of play or what to expect to see tomorrow, how would you describe your team, your philosophies, what fans can expect to see on the court out of your team tomorrow?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: We're very defensive-oriented team. So I mean, I think the last time I checked we're No. 2 in the country to UConn in defense and points given up. So we take great pride in the defensive details. We can shoot the 3, we led the conference in 3s, 3s taken and made. Kailee, who was up here earlier, broke the single-season record for that. I think probably how we are very gritty and tough on defense and how offensively that we're kind of going to let it fly from 3.

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