

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Carver-Hawkeye Arena

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Jan Jensen

Ava Heiden

Hannah Stuelke

Media Conference

Iowa 58, FDU 48

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Iowa head coach Jan Jensen along with Ava Heiden and Hannah Stuelke. We'll have an opening statement from Coach Jensen and then entertain questions for the student-athletes.

JAN JENSEN: All right, well, I'm just really pleased that we got the W. We found a way to win. What I told the players is there's no time where the phrase survive and advance is more true than in March it just is the greatest spectacle and typically, 99% of the population is for the lower seed. When you're the higher seed, everybody is, like, unless it's your fan base, it can be a little bit dicey in that first round feeling.

So I just told them the most important thing is we found a way to get it done when we really weren't playing our best. Credit FDU. They're scrappy. Small ball teams, are, not with big inside presence, they can do a lot of damage from the three. We did what we needed to do and I'm really thrilled and I'm proud of our team.

THE MODERATOR: We'll entertain questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Did the temperatures impact you at all on the floor? Could you tell it was warmer than formal? Or was it just something you put out of your mind?

AVA HEIDEN: I don't think so. We practice in that gym in the summer in the full Carver heat, so I think we're used to it for the most part. Just a little early summer feel for us.



HANNAH STUELKE: Yeah. Same.

Q. Ava, fourth quarter, you really kind of took over. You had 12 consecutive points. What was working for you there down the stretch?

AVA HEIDEN: Yeah, I think that Hannah and the guards were doing a great job finding me in the post. I think that was part of the game plan, that FDU is a little bit undersized so we really wanted to capitalize on that and I think we did a good job on that in the fourth quarter.

Q. Kylie had one point but she also had, I think, 11 rebounds and was deflecting, getting steals, doing pretty much everything she needed to do. Is there a way to quantify her performance that maybe the statistics don't show?

HANNAH STUELKE: Yeah, it's really hard to quantify with the statistics but her defense is very disruptive. It really changes the game for us. She had some really big hustle plays at the end of the game and it sways the game for us.

Q. What made them so hard to get away from? You would get leads and they would come back. What made that so difficult?

AVA HEIDEN: Again, as a small ball team they do a really good job of hitting those threes and so they can make up pretty big deficits pretty darn quick. For us, though, it was our job to shut them down on defense and get rebounds and stops and eventually we found our groove with that.

Q. You guys both seem to be really effective when you caught the ball deep in the post versus out at the elbow. What goes into creating that post catch really deep and how do you set that up?

HANNAH STUELKE: Yeah, we work a lot on early positioning, just having the right positioning, moving your feet and we did have a height advantage, too, so that always helps.

AVA HEIDEN: And for Iowa basketball, we prioritize not dribbling as much, so doing that work early is really helpful



for us.

Q. I know the game plan probably going in, knowing the size advantage you had, you two need to play a big role. How did you handle the pressure knowing you guys would have to really step up in that fourth quarter?

AVA HEIDEN: I think that throughout the year we've had to step up on certain occasions and the guards do a great job handling their load. For us on the inside, I think that Hannah's got broad shoulders. She can carry it. I'm working on carrying that as a leader, too. So we just work together and when we play for each other and as a team, we find the way.

THE MODERATOR: Anything else? Thank you, ladies. Congratulations.

Now at this time we'll entertain questions for Coach Jensen.

Q. What was it that they were able to do the whole game and what was your message to the players during the time-outs every time they kept making runs at you?

JAN JENSEN: I think that they did a nice job of sagging off and trying to give the illusion of you kind of can't pass it into the post. If you have a post at the high and a post at the low, they're kind of sagged off and letting the pass to the high post be made. They're kind of just sagging off. The pass to the post would have been open had we thrown it a little bit more.

That we've seen a lot of different ways that they can guard that high low. I think mostly what it was is they're just a really well-coached team. Stephanie Gaitley is one of the best to ever do it. 550-plus wins. So the game plan was sound and they're not going to go away offensively. If you're going to get a little tired defensively, eventually they're going to get loose. We had some runs and then when we got really sticky, we didn't pass the ball. We just were -- we'd keep it on one side and the reversals were clearly open.

That's when I kind of knew that we just had to ride this thing out. If you've coached at any level, when you see the tightness start to come into play and that happened in the second quarter, you know how we started, boom, it was good, it was light, it was free. Then all of a sudden when they made that run which is no surprise to our coaching staff because we knew we would be able to hit a few of those.

But when we couldn't score, a lot of credit, I love the game plan, but we have handled that type of game plan at other times, we just did not do as good of a job as I think we can do and will do on making the reads.

So, a lot of credit to FDU. I think we got a little tight in thinking about the what-if instead of just attacking.

Q. Ava's presence seemed to be a real determining factor, especially offensively, career high 29 points. What she did in the fourth quarter. Did it come down to that realization of just get the ball to Ava and let her do something?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, eventually when we started -- initially when we started out, I was just wanting to not call as many sets and we were finding the bigs pretty well. There was a combination when we got tight, Ava stopped demanding where she needed it and when as did Hannah. Then our guards got really hesitant. And then we held and held and held to wait and we had so many last-second average shots. So we started out really well using our strengths and then we got really muddy and sticky and then we ended up going to what really, if you could have maybe consistently done that, it wouldn't have been as close as it was at times.

We called a little bit more controlled sets to do it and we started to also just reverse the ball a little better. That last six, seven minutes, after I called a time-out, it was kind of the upperclassman will took over. I could just see, I felt a lot better, Hannah had a little chat with them and it was Hannah, some of her play and Kylie had some really blue collar plays at the end, 50/50 balls that they just weren't -- this wasn't going to be their last.

Q. You had single-digit points in back-to-back quarters. How do you account for that?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, I can't believe how many wide open shots we missed. We were 7% from the three and I don't know when's the last time we've gone 1 for 13 from threes. We just didn't have -- Chit-Chat I think I called about six different plays for her and she didn't pull the trigger. We deferred. I think it was just on a really -- that first big stage type of game, what I've been really working with Chat. When we've had our best runs in this season and really have done well, Chit-Chat has taken a good amount of shots. She shot a great percentage and she doesn't really defer.

It was a little over a year ago, this kind of interesting little tidbit for you guys. I have been break down a lot of film. Georgia has Carnegie on their team and she was a teammate of Chit-Chat Wright's. Kentucky has a kid by the

name of Morgan on their team that starts. She was a teammate of Chit-Chat Wright. USC has a kid by the name of Dunn that was a teammate of Chit-Chat and they're all starting at their schools and Chit-Chat didn't enter the starting lineup until the last two games of the season and she was the fourth option.

So the challenge this whole year has been you're good enough to run it. I need you to really take the keys and go, and you need to consider yourself the second option every time. When she's able to do that, flip it over, we're really a much better team. I think today a little bit of the amazing crowd and the feel that came into play a little bit.

So her only taking four shots in this type of a game, that was a big problem for us. I need her to take a lot more authority and get to the rim. And the ball just stuck. I have to watch the film, but it can happen when you have an advantage. I said we that he had to look inside, we need to score. But then everything just started to -- we wouldn't throw it. We would wait in the wing, wait in the wing and throw it in the corner and wait in the corner, wait in the corner. Then we throw it to the wing and finally we try to shove it in, but if you move the ball quicker, it doesn't always have to be scored just into Ava. We need to do cuts. We need to do ball screens, we needed to do split cuts.

We just had no variety. I think that starts with them. I got to get Chit-Chat to be a little more dominant.

Q. I noticed you only played seven but you mixed up those seven quite a bit throughout the game but then in the fourth quarter you sent the bigs in, you got in the bonus right away. Is that when you had that sigh of relief like, okay, eight minutes left in the game, we're in the bonus keep taking it and let Hannah and Ava just kind of take it?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, we had to go with experience. That's what I told the players in the locker room that are young. Some didn't get in. Some got in didn't play as much as the normal minutes but you kind of see how the game is I flowing and you just have to read. They may not agree with what I was seeing.

Just because maybe they didn't play as well or get as many minutes this game could be a whole different story on Monday. I just had to go with experience and Ava, she's a workhorse and you have to get this one before you get the next one. That's just an experienced team. Hannah's been there and Kylie's been there.

I told the kids, the team after the game in Megan Gustafson, if you follow the great era, she was the center.

Tania Davis was our point guard. Kathleen Doyle was our off guard. We went to the Elite Eight. We were behind Mercer with 2:53 left and Megan is one of the best post players ever. It was just the tightness and it was just the -- and it reminded me of that. Now, we're not as experienced and we're arguably maybe not as good or skilled as we had all these seniors.

So it happens. I went with the seniors because Kylie and Hannah have been there. Ava is one of the best players in the country, I believe. Certainly one of the top centers in the country, my opinion, top five. So you had to go. I just had to go and we'll worry about rest tomorrow and all the things.

Q. How important was it for you guys to set the tone early in this tournament, especially being at home and having that home advantage?

JAN JENSEN: Well, that's what we tried to do and I think we did for the first four minutes, but then I think if you're Virginia, you're probably like okay, made you feel a little better would love to really go, but I just think this tournament is just a one-and-done and you have to find ways.

I'm just so grateful for our crowd. They did definitely help us with that sixth player that was there and it's so fun to have them with us every step of the way.

I thought I did a pretty good job getting prepared. I got a lot of questions, how do you balance the pressure being at home? All this. But we didn't really finish so much and that was on me to not look so, we didn't look so fluid on offense. We were a little tight so I need to make sure I hit a little bit different buttons when we go into the game on Monday night.

Q. The temperature became kind of a story line that lives on on social media. Did it impact your team at all? Do you think it impacted the game?

JAN JENSEN: This is what I told them at halftime. I said they're hot, you're hot. Before the game, even yesterday when we started, everybody talked about it, we got to get the fans on or whatever, whoever was going to handle that the most, is it hotter? Yes. If we would have not come out on top, I would have had the same response.

You have to control the controllables. None of us can do that. That will probably never happen in a hundred years. What is it here? 80? 89? Holy cow. So we can go and everybody's going to critique that, but it's unfortunate. I played at Rutgers about eight years ago. It was -- for some reason there was a heat malfunction. Kathleen

Doyle was throwing up after the third. We went into time. It was so much hotter than that.

It wasn't great. It wasn't ideal, but it's just, you know, some kids probably handle it a little bit better than others but war we going to do? I don't think we can fault Iowa. We can't fault the NCAA. We're mad at mother nature when it's too cold. Now we get it warm and now we're mad because it did it. Was it the reason Georgia didn't win and Virginia did?

I just think it's a good lesson to everybody. It's like control the controllables. It worked out for the couple of us that won today, but we both had to play a lot of different kids, so I guess we'll see what happens on Monday. And what's the weather report on Monday? Anybody know?

Q. 56.

JAN JENSEN: So I think we should be a little bit better. We'll cool it off.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys.

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