

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Carver-Hawkeye Arena

## FDU Knights

## Coach Stephanie Gaitley

## Madlena Gerke

## Ava Renninger

### Media Conference

Iowa 58, FDU 48

**THE MODERATOR:** Now joined by FDU head coach Stephanie Gaitley, Madlena Gerke, and Ava Renninger. We'll have a brief opening statement from Coach and then entertain questions from the student-athletes. Coach?

**STEPHANIE GAITLEY:** First, I want to acknowledge Iowa, the administration, everybody, for putting on a great tournament. You guys have done a fantastic job.

I also want to congratulate Jan and her group. She took over for Lisa who I've known for a long time, and they're the ultimate professionals. The one comment that Jan made to me on the way out, she said this is why we got to get off the home courts. We got to go neutral. That's a pretty big statement to say when you're the team that earned that home court.

Having played and won some at-large games, the only time I have been in position to win at-large games was when we were like the 10 seed or the 11 seed and we weren't playing the home team. Every time we got to that next game, it made a big difference. I think the women's game has grown enough that we can start to pursue doing that. This is a game that maybe we steal if it's not on the home court.

The other thing I also want to mention is for our kids because I'm incredibly proud of them. Madlena is our only senior but three years ago we came here and it was a 60-point game. Now three years later, we've seen the progress and the growth of what Ava's been able to come in and do and Madlena and all the different pieces we have



had.

I want to thank Brad, Cathy and the entire staff that we have from FDU for giving me the opportunity to coach this great group of kids. Again, thanks to Iowa.

**Q. This is for Ava. You're down 18-3 early and then you guys went on the run and it's a close game the rest of the way. What kind of got you guys going and how confident did you get as the game went on?**

**AVA RENNINGER:** We kind of went into that time-out and just everyone took a deep breath. You got on the court, you felt the fans, you felt the atmosphere and now it's time to dig in. Teams are going to go on their runs but we have to buckle down and play our basketball.

I think that's what we talked about in the huddle. We remembered to stay together and stay confident. That's also what we talked about. Our energy was high the whole game. I think that's what helped. We didn't care who was across the court from us or where we were playing. We were focused on each other and staying together and I think that's what turned around in that time-out for us.

**Q. This has been a culmination of a really weird weather week from a blizzard to now, 88 degrees or whatever it was today. What was it like on the court? Was it more like summer workouts? Is that how it felt? And did it cause any issues when you guys were going through the game?**

**MADLENA GERKE:** The first warmup, I guess, it kind of hit us. It was warm. We really felt that like this is going to be a different atmosphere and different weather, you could say. I don't know. For me personally in a game, it didn't make much of a change. Ava can tell differently, but it was a little bit different but I didn't really feel any different.

**AVA RENNINGER:** Coming out for warmups it was like a smack in the face how hot it was in there. I already sweat a lot as it is. There was a towel or two towels given to me every time-out, every break possible.

It was really hot but I don't think it affected how we played



at all and I was really proud of how we handled it. It was extremely hot in there and I think everyone felt it, but we didn't let it play into how we played our game.

**Q. First of all, you guys should be proud of yourselves. It took a lot of effort and talent to get to this point. Overall just being here to make the first round, what did this experience mean to you just overall being here?**

MADLENA GERKE: It took me five years to get here, so. (Laughter) As Coach Gaitley said, we're living a memory right now. Take it day by day. Live in it. That's what I'm trying to do. Really absorb every emotion here. It feels great. The fact that we were able to keep up with a great team made it so much more special.

AVA RENNINGER: It feels amazing. We were here last year playing TCU, but it's definitely a different atmosphere here at Iowa. You could feel the crowd for sure. It was an amazing experience and I'm just really proud of how this team handled it. We weren't scared and we didn't back down through four quarters and I'm really happy with how we played.

**Q. Question for Ava. Felt like a lot of shot creation fell on you in the second half, especially with the high pick and roll. Can you describe those reads against a team like Iowa in this kind of environment and what you might take from that moving forward?**

AVA RENNINGER: I think that's been like Coach gives me the ball in those situations. When we need to go get a bucket, she trusts me to read in those situations. Pick and roll has been my go-to all year because I have to read if the defense is going to play me or they're going to drop off someone else.

I think that's a comfort zone for me so I like going to it and I know if I need to hit a shot, I'll hit a shot. If I need to hit the right pass, I'll hit the right pass. That just falls on the coaches for trusting me with the ball in those situations. We wanted to stay in the game and that's what we needed to do so that's what we went to.

**Q. Down the stretch, you look at the scoreboard, five-point game, three-point game. What's going through your minds when you see that?**

MADLENA GERKE: I would say we just kept reminding ourselves that we're right there. I think we all felt that it could have been either team's game. Just stick with each other. The trust I have with this team is incredible. I think we have each other's backs and there's just no backing down for me with this team.

**Q. You guys, two years in a row pretty much ran the table in your conference. I think you won 22 straight games, if I'm right, coming into this game.**

AVA RENNINGER: Something like that, I guess.

**Q. One-third for sure going into this year. To go out like this, obviously wanting to win and there are no necessarily moral victories, but how do you feel about your performance and the fact that you stood your ground against one of the premier programs in the sport?**

AVA RENNINGER: I think first it puts a lot of respect on the NEC and mid-major schools. They're a top-ten team in the country and we came in and showed what we're made of and showed what mid-major schools can do against these high teams and that's the impression we gave off.

I'm just really proud of the season we have had. Through the highs and the lows, we stuck together and obviously we had that streak. We didn't really talk about it but we were coming in here 0-0. That's how we looked at it. New season. We wanted to hit them first. I think we did just that and I think we showed what mid-majors are capable of.

MADLENA GERKE: I got nothing else to say. I feel like Ava said -- I mean, she said everything.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you. Congratulations on a wonderful season.

Now we'll entertain questions for Coach.

**Q. Stephanie, I asked you yesterday about the confidence in your team. How much of what you were able to do today comes from being a team that won 30 games and won 22 in a row? How much did confidence really play into what you guys were able to do today?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: I think a lot because even if you go back to the beginning of the season when we were at Notre Dame and at Purdue and even at Rutgers. Rutgers didn't have a terrific year but it was like a tied game with four minutes to go. I think if we played those games after the January team when the confidence had built, I think it would have made a big difference.

I was concerned about the size of Iowa. I just think if you look at it, they're hard to keep up with and I wasn't sure how we would match-up with that. I think when we went in at halftime, I wanted to make sure -- the comment I made,

are we hungry or satisfied? Are we satisfied we're just right there? Or are we hungry to finish this? I was just proud to see the kids be hungry.

**Q. The size of Iowa is one thing, outside of those two girls, Ava and Hannah, Iowa was pretty limited in what the guards produced. Only one three-point field goal on 13 attempts. What did you guys do to slow those guards down outside of the size?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: When you play a team that has -- I'm a defensive coach and when you play a team that has two bigs, you can put some attention to the perimeter because you have a second defender in the lane. If the one post was low, we try to stun it or gap it and if we had an opportunity, we would double it.

Kailee and Madlena were on the All-Defensive Team and Madlena was Defensive Player of the Year so that's what they do really, really well. So we were able to give attention to the guards because of our post defendants being one which we could plug the lane that made a big difference.

**Q. There had never been a 15 beat a 2 ever in the women's and you're down two points midway through the fourth quarter in Iowa in a sold-out arena. What was the impression you were getting from your athletes? What was their conversation level? Were they very confident? Did they ever go wow, this moment is big for us? What was the vibe, I guess, at that point?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: That's a great question. When they built the lead to nine in the third quarter and we took the time-out, my biggest thing is if we get to the last four or five minutes of a game and you're within six, you have a chance to steal it. I said guys, we're three points away from being in that margin. At no point did I think they felt like just thankful to be there. I thought they were like we're there. We're going to finish this. We want to make this happen.

At no point did I think they were just like, okay, it's a two-point game, hopefully it won't be 20. Never in that regard. It was one in which, hey, we know we can be here. The tighter we made it, the more we believed we could be there and I think when we cut it to one I think on a transition basket that we got and they called that time-out, I could feel it with the kids. They were just like, hey, we can steal this.

Again, I even said to our group that's with us, I could even here amongst all the people in the Iowa stadium, I could here our crowd yelling defense, which is amazing. I

usually don't here anything and plus I can't here in my left ear, so I usually don't here anything. So that was pretty amazing to me. I think we had everybody believing at that point.

To go back to your point about 2 versus 15, that's why I think the game's got to change. A lot of times the scores are ones in which it is what it is, but on a neutral court, you have a much better chance. Look at our men's team against Purdue. It was a neutral court and the David knocked off the Goliath there. I think we're at the point in the game now something like that needs to change.

**Q. Coach, yesterday you said that your husband had told you that you had a 2% chance to win and now you took him pretty much to the end. What do you think your husband will say to you now?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: He's back there. He'll say I'm brilliant. (Laughter) That's what he'll say. I'm brilliant. I'm just super brilliant. No...

**Q. What about what your sons said?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: What did they say?

**Q. They said mom's got to win the game. We want part of the bonus. (Laughter)**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: Oh my God. There you go. We do have three boys that all coach, two coach in the NBA and one coaches with Division II so we're a basketball family. Basketball's talked about a lot, obviously, but my husband said, and this is just for -- keep it to us, but they all coach and they were like, he said I can't even tell you what they said because there are too many probably curse words there with the officiating. I'm not going there because I'm not even going to touch that. It was a difficult situation for us when we had the team fouls build up.

But to think where we're at right now and I think Ava hit it on the head, the respect that we brought to the NEC and that we brought to FDU and to show that on any given day anybody can beat anybody, I think that's a huge step forward for women's basketball in the east.

**Q. You talked yesterday about dividing the game into five-minute segments. What did you see during those segments, specifically at the end of the third quarter?**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: I felt like we were right there. I think it was a two-point game at the end of the third quarter. The problem is what happened in the fourth quarter, we had five team fouls at the eight-minute mark and that put our back against the wall. We were doing a

really good job at half-court defense. We have to play defense without fouling because then we're going to give them free points.

When that started off that way, I was concerned but then Kailee hit a three to put us within distance again and we started off 0-8 to start the third quarter, but we didn't let up defensively. Again, they're just a really physical, strong team inside and when we got to the end of the third quarter, it's anybody's game now. We have it down to two five-minute quarters so let's just go five minutes at a time.

**Q. Just to make sure you had a chance to answer the question about the heat, just to see if that impacted you in a negative way because it's just a different game. A different experience.**

STEPHANIE GAITLEY: It's great because it's like an instant diet. It was awesome from that regard. I was like yes! Five pounds shed easy. (Laughter) No, where we did have to make an adjustment was our post players. We went in two-minute shifts which we haven't done. We usually take them to the media time-out, make a sub right before the media time-out but I think the heat was getting to them. Kailee can go all day. Madlena can go all day. As you saw with Ava, all day. The guards pretty much can stick with the 40 minutes. The fours were getting worn down because of the physicality of the game so they were getting worn down.

The philosophy there with the heat was do a two-minute rotation on the bigs.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you so much. Congratulations on a wonderful season.

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