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NCAA MEN'S BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP: REGIONAL FINAL - IOWA VS ILLINOIS

March 28, 2026

Ben McCollum
Cam Manyawu
Bennett Stirtz

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center Iowa Hawkeyes Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

Illinois - 71, Iowa - 59

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, first off, congrats to Illinois. They played a heck of a game. I thought they did a good job getting offensive rebounds. We probably missed a few box-outs or whatnot. But they played a good game and certainly congrats to them and their season.

From our lens, this group's done a lot for the University of Iowa. It's always hard right afterwards because, as a coach, you think about what you could have done better because it's just the nature of your mind. And you're sitting there, man, I mismanaged this, I did this poorly, I didn't do this, trying to put your players in the best position to win and, you know, you don't feel like you totally did.

But came out great. But again, I think if you ask these guys, they would like a second chance at this to be able to win that game because they probably still feel like they could have. But they did set a foundation for the University of Iowa and hopefully for the future. I remember when we started the program at Northwest Missouri State and we had DeShaun Cooper, he kind of started everything.

Now, you know, Bennett, Tavion, those guys started this. It's pretty cool. I think they will look back at it in 10 years and hopefully we'll be going to Final Fours and winning championships and they will sit there and say, Man, I did that. I think the University of Iowa and myself and my staff is very thankful for Tavion, Bennett, and obviously Brendan.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Bennett, you were here one year. Obviously your legacy with Coach McCollum stretches far beyond that, but what does it mean to know that you've had one of the greatest individual seasons in Iowa men's basketball history and kind of what do you take away from this brief but I'm sure very enjoyable experience in Iowa City?

BENNETT STIRTZ: Yeah, you can't really control what anyone else is going to say about you, but hopefully it's good. I just gave it my all in this Hawkeye uniform. But I just hope that they have continued success and that's all I want for them. They will do just that. I don't know, it's hard to put everything into words right now, but, yeah, I gave it my all and we all gave it our all and it was a fun run.

Q. To build upon that a little bit. 133 consecutive college starts from Northwest Missouri State to Drake to Iowa and now an Elite Eight run. Down the road a few years when you look back, how will you always remember and define your career?

BENNETT STIRTZ: I'll just always remember the people around me and the support I always had. This wouldn't have been possible without everyone in my corner and all these teammates that I've had throughout the years. So it's a testament to them and it's a testament to Coach Mac and all the coaches that I've had throughout my four years. So couldn't have done it without them and they just put me in the right spots.

Q. Illinois was plus 17 on the glass and 16 O boards. What was the challenge there? I know it's easy to look at your performance against Florida, against a dominant rebounding team, and say, well, you guys should have been able to do that again. What's different about Illinois and what wasn't working in either half tonight?

CAM MANYAWU: They consistently crashed all five guys and we didn't do a great job making sure we were boxing out and getting the ball, and that was just kind of consistently through the game. We just didn't do a very good job hitting and making sure we were getting the defensive rebounds and that led to them getting a bunch of O boards.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

Q. You had Alvaro out for about 17 minutes straight of game time and then plus the halftime break. I'm not sure if the horn malfunction was in there as well. What was the thought process there? I know you were relying on your assistants for subs, but is that a regret? I know you can't have regrets postgame, but your thoughts on that stretch where you had Alvaro on the bench.

BEN MCCOLLUM: Yeah, I don't know. I think it's just we felt like other guys were probably ready to go and tuned in to what we were exactly doing. Tricky game because he has to guard a true 5, a big guy. Yeah, I don't probably regret a lot of that stuff. I would have to go back and watch and see if there were some things. I don't know, I would have to go back and watch.

Q. You mentioned the horn malfunction. That's a weird thing to happen in an Elite Eight game. What were you thinking at the moment? Did that have any affect?

BEN MCCOLLUM: Probably gave them a little bit more of a break. I thought we were able to get going and I thought that gave 'em a break. But, yeah, nothing I can control, so it is what it is. Just move on, move forward. It didn't probably impact the fact that we gave up 16 O boards, so (laughing).

Q. You guys shot 23 percent in the second half, 1-8 from two. You guys shot 57 percent in the first half, so what changed?

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BEN McCOLLUM: Probably our lack of shooting caught up with us. I think that we couldn't space it, and so when you can't space it, you can't get to the rim. So it just became a problem where we were having to take tough threes. I think then you compound that with giving up offensive rebounds, because we're still right there, regardless. But that was probably the biggest factor was we just didn't have enough shooting out there. So when you don't have shooting, you can't get to the rim, and it doesn't space the floor.

That probably was our Achilles Heel the whole season. Even in those games, we were able to finish against Florida because they were a little bit different type of player and they were a little more spaced. They weren't as spaced, and so you're in the pockets and you're trying to score over length, and our size down there probably just wasn't as good.

Q. I know you can't comment directly on officials, but there was a lot going on. It was visible, the frustration from your guys, so I guess I'll form this question so that we don't get you in trouble. But how do you deal with your players that are visibly -- Cooper fouls out, they're visibly frustrated in a game where you're still in it towards the end. How do you help them manage through what was obviously a frustrating situation there?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, I think that one was pretty frustrating. That one is fine to comment on. I don't think it's like the officials were bad. I'm not saying that. Yeah, that specific situation, I thought that that was kind of let go throughout the whole game, where Cooper couldn't get through his screens consistently, which was fine. That was fine. Like, move on, that's how they're going to call it, and then to call it late was disappointing.

But, yeah, I mean, I haven't watched it, so I don't know. I haven't watched the whole game. Because sometimes when you go back and you watch it, you're like, oh, maybe they were right, maybe I was wrong or vice versa. So yeah, I mean again, what are you going to do? Send it in, and they're going to say, Sorry. You're still home (laughing).

Q. I know it might be hard to appreciate the season in this moment, but can you just reflect on your journey over the past couple of years and how far you've come and just kind of everything you've accomplished?

BEN McCOLLUM: Yeah, it is tricky like with these scenarios because just as a competitor you think you should be in the Final Four right now. So it's so tricky. Especially right after it. I think the journey's been interesting. I can remember two years ago I was in Maryville, Missouri, and then I went to Drake and I remember walking into Drake and I'm sitting there, I had been somewhere for 15 years, and I'm like, what in the heck did I just do. Just turned my world upside down, turned my family's world upside down. But sometimes you have to do that, one, to make sure that you give kind of more to different communities and stuff like that because do you have a kind of higher purpose in life, in my opinion.

And then the other part is, is you have to make yourself uncomfortable. And it's been uncomfortable for a couple years. But we're getting there. We're continuing to build and I certainly appreciate my family, my wife and kids and all that they have sacrificed for us to kind of reach this goal and, you know, the goal of getting Iowa basketball to where it belongs. I think we've got a good foundation for that and we'll continue to build it.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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