

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Penn vs Illinois

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Penn Quakers

Fran McCaffery

AJ Levine

Cam Thrower

Michael Zandoni

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're lucky enough to be joined by Penn student-athletes AJ Levine, Cam Thrower, and Michael Zandoni.

Q. For each of you guys, when scouting Illinois and looking at film, what stands out the most, and what are going to be some of the keys to this game?

CAM THROWER: I'll start it off. Obviously we know they're a very talented offensive team. I think the biggest key is rebounding. They have a lot of size up front, and our job is to box out and make sure that we hold them to one shot and ultimately not letting them get into a rhythm of moving the ball side to side and letting them feel comfortable.

MICHAEL ZANONI: Going off of that, another big thing for us is getting out and running. Obviously we have shooters, so taking advantage of that and their size and getting down the floor and beating them to spots is going to be a big deal for us.

AJ LEVINE: I'd say they covered most of what I was thinking too.

Q. These last 72 hours have been a bit of a whirlwind for you guys. Do you feel settled in now that you're down here and things have kind of normalized a little bit, or are things still moving pretty fast?

MICHAEL ZANONI: Everything has been crazy, obviously two overtime wins, and pulling those games out was huge.



This is a dream for all of us. We're super happy to be here. Obviously it's a business trip, and we expect to win.

CAM THROWER: To piggy-back off that, a lot has changed since those two wins. Obviously the way we do things now is different, but ultimately at the end of the day, we still have that focus, like Michael said, to come down here and get a win.

I think now that we've been here for quite a little bit, we're starting to get settled in and kind of regain that focus and starting to get prepared for Illinois and take the court.

AJ LEVINE: I'm just extremely excited for this opportunity. I don't know if I would say settled in, I would just say hyped up for this game and for all of our preparation and everything like that.

Q. Guys, have you seen Fran McCaffery? Like with his familiarity with Brad Underwood and Illinois, has that shown up at all this week?

MICHAEL ZANONI: Yeah, for sure. They actually played in The Palestra earlier this year, so we knew they had a relationship, obviously playing against each other in the Big Ten for ten years. Coach McCaffery has talked about it a lot, knows how he coaches and he knows how we coach, so that's going to be a good matchup.

Q. What's it been like with Fran this first year? I'll start with AJ since you always seem to be going last. What's it been like, him coming in and getting this program established?

AJ LEVINE: I think he came in with a plan and a goal that he instilled in all of us. To see it like coming to fruition is just unbelievable.

I think the biggest thing with him is just how clear he is with us and how direct, like we all know what we need and what he wants out of us. Throughout the year we've all improved and gotten better and gotten to March Madness because of that. So much credit to Fran for us being here right now.

CAM THROWER: I would say, having been through four years here at Penn, having Fran here has been a big help



to not only just from my situation, but for everyone on the team. I think the way we play, the way he instills confidence in us is something that's very cool to see, and you saw it show throughout the Ivy League tournament with different guys stepping up.

I think the biggest part of our team since he's been here is that every guy has stepped up at different moments. That's what's special about us. He's allowed us to go out and play our game and contribute to the game while still being ourselves.

MICHAEL ZANONI: And another little thing that he does really well is he's really good, obviously as a basketball coach, but also as a players' coach. He really cares about all of us as players and wants what's best for us off the court.

Q. I wanted to ask, Coach talked about the limelight of this tournament and just the difference in playing under that spotlight than the regular season spotlight? How do you feel about the media, the practices, and that experience as a whole?

AJ LEVINE: I think that's kind of every hooper's dream is to go play in front of 500-some-thousand people that watch the Ivy League championship and the millions that are going to watch this game. I think it's just exciting. It makes you want to play harder. It makes you want to show what you can do and your ability and showcase that to the whole world.

Really it's just a dream come true, and it's making me want to play harder than I already do.

CAM THROWER: To capitalize off of that, this is definitely a dream come true. For me throughout my life, this is a position where I want to be always. To have an opportunity to just not play in this tournament but also play against a great team is something that we at Penn have always looked forward to.

As far as like practices and like the media attention of Ivy Madness and now here, it's been an amazing opportunity, and it's been a huge blessing for each and every one of us. We're embracing the moment, and we're excited to finally get on the core, play, and do our thing.

MICHAEL ZANONI: I think it's a great opportunity and something I've dreamed of since I was a little kid. My parents actually met at Illinois. So I was super excited when we drew them.

THE MODERATOR: Lucky enough now to be joined by Penn head coach Fran McCaffery.

FRAN McCAFFERY: We're just thrilled to be here. Everybody says the same thing, but it is truly an honor and tremendous accomplishment by our players. Couldn't be more proud and excited to be back in this building.

Q. Fran, is everything okay with TJ Power? I guess he's been suffering from an illness, is that correct?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yes, he's under the weather. Started yesterday, did not practice today. He's here now. He just got here. He wants to watch, but we'll see. We'll see how he does tomorrow if he's ready.

Q. What would you say his status is for the game?

FRAN McCAFFERY: We really won't know until tomorrow.

Q. Fran, it's obviously been a whirlwind for your guys over the last 72 to 96 hours. As a coach, do you have to do anything to -- whether it's settle them down or center them or I don't know the right word for it?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Not really. They had a chance to celebrate Sunday. We met Monday night and started working on Illinois. We obviously started working earlier than that, but they started working Monday night. Practiced Tuesday and practiced again today, and we're ready for tomorrow.

We're not getting involved in anything other than this is a business trip. That said, I think, to your question, I want them to enjoy it because, as we can tell and we all know, it's different. I told them that, and I have a lot of experience with this tournament, fortunately. So I want them to appreciate what they've accomplished.

There's a fine line between that, being satisfied and wanting to continue to compete. Their professionalism all year has been so incredible and so impressive to me, and that's how they've been. So we'll be ready.

Q. I'm curious, when you came back to Penn, what did you expect, and maybe has there been any way your approach has changed in a way you didn't expect coming from Iowa?

FRAN McCAFFERY: No, no change whatsoever. I coached a number of different programs, been fortunate enough to have success because I had really good players that wanted to win, prioritize winning, and from the minute I got to University of Pennsylvania, that's what these guys did.

They truly love each other. It sounds cliché-ish, but when



you have a big roster like we do, typically not everybody's happy, and these guys are. They support one another in practice, on the bench, on the road, and they're ready to step up if somebody gets hurt, somebody gets sick, and that's what you have to have.

Q. You've seen Brad's teams obviously a lot. How has his roster evolved from some of those early meetings to what you're seeing now from them?

FRAN McCAFFERY: It's a different era. You're going to the portal a little bit more, but Brad has always recruited pretty consistently. He gets pieces that fit. He gets piece that's prioritize winning, like I said, and his teams continue to win because, as we know, some teams that build rosters now look good on paper, but they don't win. His teams win, and there's a reason for that.

His staff is tremendous. His experience enables him to be able to do that. It's not easy. And this team is really impressive to me because they have so many different weapons in terms of offensive ability to score, but how they defend, how they rebound, the depth, and again, getting everybody to understand and accept their roles and put winning first.

Q. Fran, at Siena you had experienced pulling off NCAA Tournament upsets as a mid-major. Do you see any similarities with this team that shows they may be capable of doing the same thing just from the style of play or the way they're playing going in?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I would say the similarities are we've got some veteran guys. Yeah, it's my first year, but they play like a veteran group. They're not a big mistake team. We've got a number of different guys that can make shots.

Throughout the course of the season, we've developed some depth, which is what you need. That team you're referencing was special in the sense that they really were veteran guys and proven winners over a long period of time.

These guys have figured it out, and that's been really enjoyable for me and really impressive. Look at a guy like AJ Levine, he was up and down at the beginning of the year, but he figured it out, and he's understanding how to engineer victory.

It certainly helps to have TJ, one of the best players in the country, bar none. Ethan Roberts had a great year. He's not playing now, but Michael Zanoni, we've got a number of different guys that are buying in, and that's what you have to have. Those similarities don't go away. If a team's winning, that's what you have.

Q. What is the status of Ethan Roberts coming into the tournament?

FRAN McCAFFERY: He's not playing.

Q. You mentioned earlier the difference in the spectacle and limelight of playing in the tournament. How has it been seeing them experience all that? For the guys it's a dream come true. So what is it like for guys to have that experience?

FRAN McCAFFERY: We just let them enjoy it. Flying here on a charter -- they didn't charter anywhere this year until now. The media attention, the fan interest. Obviously at The Palestra this year and in Philadelphia, it picked up and rightfully so. This is different. Everything's different. They need to know and understand that, but they need to also appreciate it because it's a reflection on what they've accomplished.

Q. Can you talk about your relationship and friendship with Brad, meeting him again, not in the Big Ten, and the text he shared with you? I guess, is it for public? Was it PG or was it --

FRAN McCAFFERY: It was a text that you would expect Brad to send.

(Laughter).

Yeah, I consider Brad a dear friend. We competed hard but with incredible respect. I coached against his son. He coached against my sons. His son and my sons are really good friends. They're in the business, Connor and Tyler.

As you probably remember, I came down and participated in his Coaches Versus Cancer event along with Tom and Fred and Matt. No hesitation to pick up the phone and say, would you come down to Champaign? Would you help us? He does a fabulous job with that. It's one of the best events in the country. Glad to do it, happy to be there, had a lot of fun with it.

I think it's important in this business to compete but also develop friendships and relationships, and that's what we have. It's very special.

Q. Back to TJ, obviously you knew you weren't going to have Ethan coming in, but whatever uncertainty there is with TJ, how does that complicate or has that complicated your ability to prepare for this game and kind of your team's ability to kind of act as if they've been there before?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Obviously that would be a difficult situation not to have him. I thought Ethan Roberts is a special player, and we're all so disappointed for him because he really was an integral part in helping us get here.

But when you've had your second concussion, it's not something that you mess with. His health and welfare is our priority. Now you throw TJ into the mix of a guy who may or may not play. If you were asking me do I think he's going to play, I'd say yes, but he didn't practice today. He didn't feel up to it.

That's a game changer because of a lot of things we do are featuring him. It doesn't make me a genius. He's, as I said, one of the most versatile, one of the most talented, one of the most accomplished players in college basketball this year. So we were going to go to him. Brad knows that. He'll have a defense scheme to stop him.

So if he's not out there, it's no different than any other time, it's next man up. You have to have somebody else that's ready. Cam Thrower, you could not have asked him to do any better than he did in Ethan's absence. Hopefully somebody else will step up in TJ's place if he can't go.

Q. Fran, understanding you have your own game to worry about, I wonder what you thought of having Siena here in Greenville making their first tournament appearance since you left in 2010.

FRAN McCAFFERY: I watched that game the other night. I was pulling for those guys. Gerry's done an unbelievable job. I was particularly interested and happy for Riley Mulvey, who played for me for four years, my relationship with his family. Just to watch him dominate the way he did was so enjoyable for me.

A lot of my guys are still there. Jon D'Argenio hired me. He's still there. We've been texting back and forth. Mike Demos, worked with him. I'm just still connected with a lot of our alumni and friends, dear friends from my time there.

So I'm hoping to see those guys. I've been in communication with a bunch of them who are coming to the game, to see us and to see them. I couldn't be happier for those guys. Tremendous place, as you know.

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