

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

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Keaton Wagler

Kyan Boswell

Ben Humrichous

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Pleased to be joined by Illinois student-athletes Kyan Boswell, Keaton Wagler, and Ben Humrichous.

Q. Keaton, you're consensus second team All-American. You met the criteria to have your jersey go up at State Farm Center. What does that mean to you? Did you ever expect this coming in before you started your freshman season?

KEATON WAGLER: It means the world to me. Growing up, you always dream of these things, like having your jersey hung up in rafters. It's really awesome to have it done as a freshman too. It's a big shout-out to my teammates and coaches for letting me go out there, trust me to play my game and have fun.

Q. Keaton, your first NCAA Tournament experience. What are you most looking forward to about this experience, and what does it mean for you to do it with this group of guys?

KEATON WAGLER: I think I'm most looking forward to just try to have a lot of fun with it and make a deep run. It's going to be super special to be able to play with my teammates. This is one of my favorite teams I've ever been a part of, and I just know how special of a team we are. So I'm just looking forward to that.

Q. What stands out the most about Penn when looking at film and scouting them?



KYAN BOSWELL: We started watching film today, and I think we have the ability, hopefully we can dominate the glass again, but one of the biggest things is their ability to shoot for sure. They can stretch the ball out in a lot of off-ball actions.

The priority for us is our communication and mental focus coming into this game will be huge. They'll be a good matchup for us. You know how Coach is, we just crash the glass, we'll get the job done.

KEATON WAGLER: I think the biggest key for us is going to be rebounding, offensive rebounding. If we can get a lot of our misses back, we'll be able to control the game, control the pace of the game.

They're a really good team. We know that. We can't come in there and think about anything else. Just keep it game by game.

THE MODERATOR: Ben, anything you want to add?

BEN HUMRICHIOUS: They said it great.

Q. Honored to have you here in Greenville. Have you had a chance to see any of the community? What do you think?

KYAN BOSWELL: So far what I've seen, it's been really pretty around our hotel. There's this little outdoor area with nice little water and all that.

No, we haven't been able to do too much, but yeah.

Q. Question for all of you. I know you spent some time injured this season. You feeling good? You ready to support the team for a good run?

KYAN BOSWELL: Yes, ma'am. My biggest thing right now, all of our bodies are feeling healthy. Coach Fletch has done a good job of making sure we get the appropriate rest. Tomorrow just take care of business as usual.

Q. What has been like the last couple -- the last couple of days, how has it been kind of a mental reset for you guys after kind of an early exit to the Big Ten Tournament?



BEN HUMRICHOS: It's been a great week for us. Right when we got back, we got right to work and spent some time just getting back to who we are, figuring out who we are as an identity, just re-establishing some of the principles we've had. We got a little bit of rest before we came back and started preparing for the tournament.

I like the position we're in. I like the head space we're in. We got a lot of really great days on the court together, making sure we get some time for our bodies and our minds. I'm excited for what we do in this tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Pleased to be joined by Illinois head coach Brad Underwood.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's a pleasure to be here. There's nothing better than being a part of the NCAA Tournament and having an opportunity to win a National Championship. We get to do that starting off against a good friend and a familiar foe for the Illini people.

Fran, my hat's off to him and his team for winning the Ivy League, a great season. We had some battles over the years that were legendary in the history of Illinois basketball. My involvement with Coaches Versus Cancer, along with his, we've become very good friends.

Our sons are great acquaintances. It's unique that I got to coach against his two sons. He coached against mine.

It's a great opportunity. We're excited to be here. We know we've got our hands full facing a great player in Power, coming off just a tremendous performance, one of the best performances I've seen all year, and a team that, when you face a Fran McCaffery team, you're going to get a team that's electric offensively. I think he's one of the best offensive coaches in all of college basketball.

They're going to mix up defenses. They're going to be very physical. They're going to play very, very hard, as good coaches get their players to do.

Excited for the opportunity. We'll have to play well to win.

Q. Keaton is a consensus second team All-American. He's now able to have his jersey go up in the rafters. What does that mean to you to have a freshman who not everybody thought was going to be all that his freshman year, turn into somebody who's getting their name up there with the best of the best?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think it's really special. I think it just shows how little scouting services know, but I think it's also a tribute to him and his poise. I think his teammates

deserve a lot of credit as well.

I think this is our fifth one in my nine years. It's fun to see. I was telling our staff before I watched Kofi play in a high school game where he had two points, and I watched Keaton play in a high school game where he had two points, and they became All-Americans in college. It's not all about scoring points. It's all the intangible things they become and the hard work.

Keaton's worked very, very hard, and it's fun when teams have success, some individual success can happen along with that.

As his coach, I'm proud of him. I know how he's raised and how -- what he stands for as a competitor and I have great appreciation for that.

Q. You mentioned you kind of have a unique perspective on Fran and Penn by extension. I'm curious what did you think when he first took the job? Now almost a year later when you kind of look at them through the prism of an opponent, what do you see that he's done there?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think it's very unique. We actually played in The Palestra this year when we played Penn State, and Fran came by before the game. I told our staff, this is pure joy. This is what I saw when I saw Fran. I saw the smile, he was happy. He told us exactly where he sat when he was a kid watching games in The Palestra, got to play there.

Then you come full circle and you come back to your alma mater, I can't imagine there's maybe anybody in college basketball any more proud than Fran McCaffery is. To be able to live out something like that is really pretty cool. It doesn't get to happen very often, but he was so happy.

In this profession that's really hard to do. What he's done with that team is just short of amazing. They're good. It's a good basketball team. I see Fran's thumbprint all over it and the competitiveness. I don't think I expected anything else. I figured he would be an impactful coach and have Penn right where they're at and fight for the league championship every year.

Q. With the exception of the Michigan game, in the four losses you had last month one hallmark has been giving up late second-half leads. I'm curious, has that been something you practiced since last weekend or just business as usual for you guys?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's something I haven't made too much of a deal of. I think we're aware of it. We're trying to

figure out maybe what's caused it. It's been literally something different in almost every game.

I'm glad we've had leads in those games, but we've had some unfortunate turnovers, we've missed some free throws, missed a couple wide open shots.

Then in our last game against Wisconsin, really out of character because I think we're Number 1 in the country and the fewest fouls. We committed four fouls in a run that put them on the foul line, and that's something we normally don't ever do.

It's been a little bit of something every time. I'm not trying to focus too much on that. We also won at Purdue, won at Nebraska, done some other things that are pretty good along those lines as well. So I think it's more just unique.

As I look at it, we've lost them. So the odds are in our favor that they'll go the other way.

Q. As a higher seed, as a heavy favorite, I'm curious how you look at the challenge of maybe getting a team -- making sure a favorite team, so to speak, is ready for the challenge because we've seen in these tournaments that upstarts win these games if teams aren't 100 percent focused where they need to be. What do you consider the biggest challenge in getting a team ready for that?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I've got a unique perspective, I've done that twice. So I've had some success on the other side of that. I was a 12 when we beat VCU, and actually a 14 when we beat a 3.

It's what we talk about all year. It's not just getting in the Tournament, but the margins are very small. Every team here is great. They've either won their league, had great, great seasons and an at-large, or they've won their tournament. So they're hot or they've had great seasons.

Maximizing every play is what it's about. The previous question was about losing a game in overtime, it's not in overtime, it's the possessions in the first half or whatever that all of a sudden they add up. It's a missed free-throw blockout. All of those things take maximum mental effort. You never want to be in a position to lose a game because mentally you weren't here. We've talked about that all year.

So there's none of that going on with us. We just got a guy who scored 44 and grabbed 14 rebounds, maybe the hottest player coming into this thing. So none of that for us.

I told them of my experiences in the past. We have to be ready to go.

Q. For those that don't know about this particular team, what is something that you want the world to know, the nation to know going into this tournament about this particular group, and what is the takeaway that you would like for the nation to take away from through this tournament?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: First of all, I'm going to start with who they are. This is as fun a group as I've been around. Great, great personalities. It's a shame people don't get to know the name on the back. They know a number maybe. But great, great character, extremely competitive, extremely tight knit both on and off, maybe more so than any team I've ever had. They do everything together. That's been a joy.

I think that their competitive spirit every day. I can minimize very, very few, can't think of many bad days of practice. They've taken a mindset of setting a standard to practice well every day, and I have tremendous respect for this group's approach.

Then we have a group of young men, more than one, who aren't afraid to be leaders, who aren't afraid to be -- have a little conflict with a teammate, and that's really unique in today's world. So got great appreciation for this team, for who they are. We've got some great, great students we had the highest GPAs we've ever had end of semester. So this is a pretty well-rounded group both on the court and off.

Q. When scouting Penn or looking at film, what stands out the most? Does that change at all with Ethan Roberts out and Power questionable with an illness?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I feel terrible for Ethan. If that's true and he's not playing -- I know he was dealing with some concussion stuff, but you hate for a senior that's had just an outstanding career. He's their leading scorer or second-leading scorer, 17 a game. He's an elite shooter, great competitor. I really enjoyed watching him play.

They won a tournament without him. Their backup did a heck of a job and had 19, I think, in the championship game. I don't know the status with Power. I would assume that he will be participating, but I always tell our players I had the best game of my high school career with 102 degree fever. When somebody gets sick, it scares me to death.

I hope he's not in a position to have the greatest of his career coming off a 44-point game.

Q. After the loss to Wisconsin on Friday, you talked a lot about rebounding. How have you seen improvements on that front over the last couple days of practice, maybe specifically from David, Tomi, Z?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We treated Saturday as a game day as, and Saturday was really intense. In that intensity part of practice, it wasn't just up-and-down competing, it was rebounding stuff. Then the accountability piece to that was brought up. The numbers were put behind that from our last few games. So we worked very diligently on that.

We have to get more from everybody. It's not just one person, it's our collective group. I think we're third in the country in rebounding, and yet it's cost us in certain games. We have to find that magic back and that eagerness and that second and third effort on the glass.

Q. Let me first of all welcome you to Greenville. Lots of Illinois alums here excited to see you. What are the odds you're going to not go into overtime and give us all a heart attack? Because there's been a few of those this season. Mentally exhausting for you, mentally exhausting for the team. How does that play into this?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: They get over it much easier than I do. Like I said earlier, the big thing about -- I look at games like that like I look at as a shooter. If you miss five or six in a row, I know over the course of time, you're a good shooter, so the odds are going to be in your favor. You might lose four, five in a row or miss four, five in a row. Well, I'm going to make four, five in a row.

That's the way I spin it. Like I said, it's the overtime or the end of a game isn't the issue. It's the plays that might happen that are not the plays we want to make throughout the course of a game, and those are the ones we've got to try to clean up and avoid.

For the most part, we don't turn the ball over a lot. Like I said, in the last game it was very uncharacteristic of us to foul as much as we've fouled. We've shot a ton more free throws than our opponents, and that was the one game all year that it was just completely reversed.

Yeah, we'll go our way. Thank you for being here. I spent a year in Columbia, South Carolina, and it's great to be back in South Carolina.

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