

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

Thursday, March 19, 2026  
Greenville, South Carolina, USA  
Bon Secours Wellness Arena

**Illinois Fighting Illini**  
**Brad Underwood**  
**Keaton Wagler**  
**David Mirkovic**

Media Conference

Illinois - 105, Penn - 70

THE MODERATOR: Coach, if you could give an opening statement.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I thought a couple things were vital in this game. I thought the first half we did a really, really nice job on Power. I thought Kylan was absolutely phenomenal in that he gave up the last 3 before the end of the half, which I wasn't very happy with, but his touches were very hard. I thought our process was very good in the first half. We just didn't make a lot of shots.

That's where this guy came in. I thought he was the best player on the court tonight, especially in the first half, his physicality. Ten rebounds in a half and 17 points. Again, we talk about those being our daily vitamins is the rebounding piece. 28-14 advantage at half. Then it was just delivering body blows.

Then I thought Keaton did an excellent job. They were very physical with him, tried to take him out of it. Every time some team has done that, we've kind of had the opposite effect. He gets everybody else going, and then we made shots in the second half.

Very pleased. Beat a great Penn team. A guy that I talked about before the game I have so much admiration before. I thought they played very, very hard, very physical, and had a spectacular year. I couldn't be any happier for Fran and his family.

That's a nice ball team, and congratulations on their season. Just happy to escape it.



**Q. Keaton, you obviously have racked up a lot of accolades this season. I want to get your thoughts on Mirk and the chemistry you've built together as freshmen.**

KEATON WAGLER: I think Mirk, all year he's been one of the best freshmen in the country. With this loaded freshman class we have, he's been overshadowed a bit. We see every day in practice, and in the games he does all the little stuff for us. He rebounds, plays physical, plays hard all the time.

I think tonight he just showed what he's capable of. I'm super proud of him for how he came out here on this big stage and how he played. He set the tone for us, having ten rebounds in the first half.

Coach came in, and he's like we've got to help him out a bit on the glass there. So, yeah, he really set the tone for us.

**Q. You had a difficult time getting going in the first half, did a lot better in the second half, especially the first ten minutes of the second half. What was the key to getting yourself going?**

KEATON WAGLER: I think it was just continue to play how I was playing really. I got good shots in the first half, but they just weren't falling. I got the same shots in the second half, and they were. Just staying confident, just keep playing how I was playing, moving the ball, and good things were happening.

**Q. David, you typically bring the same intensity tonight that you brought most of the season. What was the difference tonight that allowed you to really impact the game like you did in that first half?**

DAVID MIRKOVIC: That's what I do every day, even practices and on games. I just crash the board trying to bring that physicality, and I mean balls on the offensive glass were just like magnets to me because I was crashing and I got a lot of easy points on the rim. That's what got me going and whole team, just that.

**Q. What did you guys learn about yourselves, your team, your group tonight that you can help as you**



**advance the rest of the tournament?**

KEATON WAGLER: I think what we saw tonight, if we can defend for a whole 40 minutes like we did, we have a really good chance of winning games. I feel our offense will always be on point. When we're getting stops, as far as our offense, we get out in transition, getting downhill, getting fouled, spraying for 3s, things like that.

**Q. Just wanted to get your thoughts on Kylan and also Ben and the leadership you guys have gotten from them over the course of the season.**

KEATON WAGLER: For me Kylan's been a really great leader the whole season, ever since I got here. Tonight he showed it a lot by stepping up and guarding their best player the whole time.

He held him to six points, which is really hard to do. He made it physical, made it hard for him to get going, and then Ben, he's a guy that lifts us all up when things aren't going as well. He's there for us. He's always telling me to smile out there, have fun with it.

He just does all the little things for us, defensively. He always has his hands always in the right spots getting rebounds, that stuff.

**Q. Obviously the contributions from David and Keaton were huge, but Tomislav Ivusic in the second half, 12 points, 4 rebounds, got him going with a lot of touches going in the second half, which we haven't seen a lot of as of late. Was that the key to the second half? What got Tomi going tonight?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It started defensively. I thought he maybe had his best game defensively that he's had in a while. Yeah, we got him a couple paint touches, took advantage of some coverage stuff that they had.

Tomi can score down there. It's something we do. We don't do it frequently, but we do it when we feel like we've got matchup opportunities. We score in the paint a lot of different ways, but it was nice to see his 3 ball go, seven rebounds. It was great to see him because he's so cerebral. What he brings to our team is more than just on a stat sheet.

**Q. Coach, I wanted to ask just about Kylan. You obviously talked about the job you did on TJ Power. What specifically did you see? Was it more of him just denying or what went into that performance for him tonight?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We talked a lot about making his

touches hard. We wanted to have some physicality. Kylan's physical. He's very, very good going left. I thought Cam did a really good job. We talked a lot about showing off his ball screens. We did that to kind of disrupt.

Again, we limited his attempts, and like you said, he got the one make right before half. I was more upset with myself because I should have called a quick timeout. I had the timeout after we scored.

Again, Kylan just seems to have that ability to rise to the level. He had great hands. He poked a ball away a few times, and that's all disruptive.

**Q. Just looking at your stat sheet, you had really a balanced attack, but yet being led by two freshmen. What does that say about the maturity and the growth of your team overall?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think it speaks to our veterans. They're not in any way threatened by any of that. They're accepting. I've said it all along, this team has tremendous chemistry, both on and off the court. They don't care who does it.

They have pure joy seeing others succeed. Our locker room was just bouncing off the walls because of Mirk's record. It tied our NCAA record for most rebounds in an NCAA Tournament game. There's happiness for everybody. That's really contagious, and it's made this group a lot of fun to coach.

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