

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

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

Penn Quakers
Fran McCaffery
Cam Thrower
Michael Zanoni

Media Conference

Illinois - 105, Penn - 70

Q. Guys, obviously rebounding, a big advantage to them tonight, especially in the first half against maybe the tallest lineup in the country. What can you say about dealing with that size on the boards?

CAM THROWER: Obviously we try to give it our best effort to limit them to one. Obviously those are some pretty big dudes out there. Ultimately, I think the biggest thing is we fought till the end. We tried our best. Yeah, their size was pretty tough to contend with.

It was a good experience overall. They're a great team besides their size and lineups and stuff. We tried to fight our best, but it just wasn't good enough.

MICHAEL ZANONI: I thought everybody that came in did a good job of fighting to the best of their ability. I give credit to the whole team. It was the game plan for us, and I thought we executed it the best we could.

Q. Mike, especially, did it feel good to have some moments where you really got loose in the first half and despite the loss, be able to show on a national stage what you can do?

MICHAEL ZANONI: For sure. As a kid, I always dreamed of this. So to go out and do this was really fun, especially with "Penn" across my chest, it was a dream come true. It was a dream school for me.

To play with my brothers out there and hit some shots, it was a really cool feeling. I know my younger self was



super happy.

Q. For you, Cam, especially after four years here at Penn to get this March Madness berth, that one basket you had in the first half over Keaton was just tremendous. What has this whole experience meant for you?

CAM THROWER: It's definitely been a dream come true. Like Mike said, a lot of kids dream of this opportunity. For me, it was an opportunity for me to step up and, like Mike and so many of our teammates, to showcase what we can do on that court, regardless if we win or lose.

For me I just want to be aggressive, leave no regrets, and ultimately capitalize and seize on the moment.

It was a pretty cool move to make on him. He's a great player. No, I just want to be aggressive and take advantage of my opportunities and moments.

Q. I just wonder if you could address their size issue. Did you know it was going to be this much of an issue coming in? Secondly, how tough was it with TJ missing practice the last couple days?

FRAN McCAFFERY: The first part of your question, clearly, I know. I've coached against them quite a bit. Even if you didn't, you watch them on film, you could see it. Then when you physically see them, see how big they are -- I thought we did a pretty good job defensively in the first half, they only shot 39 percent. When you get 14 back and get 16 second-chance points, that's the difference in the game. They had 16 second-chance points, we had none.

Then it was more of the same in the second half with their size. What was the other part of the question again?

Q. TJ not practicing.

FRAN McCAFFERY: TJ wasn't himself. That is one tough kid there. I love him. He tried. He was sick for two days. We thought he was going to get better. We put four or five IVs in him to try to get him through it. He played 30 minutes for me. When I took him out last time, I was not going to put him back in the game. It would not have been fair to him.

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Big shot at the end of the half gave us a little bit of momentum. Of course they paid a lot of attention to him. But you could tell, in particular on the glass, because he's an elite rebounder, that he didn't have quite the energy or the explosion that he normally does. But there was no question he was going to show up and fight for us. I'm so proud of him.

Q. Coach, you did a good job of limiting Keaton Wagler, especially in the first half. In the second half he really got going, especially in the first ten minutes. What changed defensively there?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Nothing changed. He plays the game at his pace. I think that's what makes him really good. He's not going to force the issue. If it's open, he shoots it. If somebody else is open, he throws it to them. He's got it figured out. He's a terrific player. There was no change, same guy.

Q. Coach, you've spoken all week about just wanting your guys to enjoy this tournament experience. Right there you tell Mike and Cam to take their name plates. Anything about how special this has been for the team?

FRAN McCAFFERY: After the game -- I didn't break the game down at all with them. I just told them how proud I was of them. I'm a new coach here, and I just said, hey, I come in and I ask you to follow the path that I'm going to try to show you, and to a man they did that every day.

We'd practice in the morning; they showed up early, and they just worked extremely hard and had an incredibly positive attitude every day. I know coaches say that a lot, but when you have 18 guys, some of them aren't playing. It's not always easy to be that hard-working, that committed to your brother, that committed to winning, and every one of them was.

It gives me great pride because I wore that jersey, and I told them that. My teammates were at practice today. My teammates were at my press conference. It's those relationships -- this is about relationships. That's what you talk about now. You don't talk about, hey, we should have got this rebound and we didn't execute that out-of-bounds play, no.

What they accomplished this year together, and to watch them celebrate last Sunday, there's no better feeling as a coach. I have not had more fun coaching a team than I did this year.

Q. I was going to ask you about that. Brad

Underwood said the other day that, when he saw you at The Palestra this year, he'd never seen you so rejuvenated and happy. Where did that come from, and how do you reflect on that now that the season is over and you have another year to move forward to?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Unless you grew up in Philadelphia and spent every Saturday night at The Palestra, pretty much all your childhood years, you probably wouldn't completely understand it. Dreaming one day am I going to wear a jersey of a Big Five team?

I knew the power of the academic profile at University of Pennsylvania, and that became my number one choice. Then we were on really good teams there.

All three of my roommates were at the game on Sunday. That's what it's all about. My teammates, my roommates are there supporting me. My alma mater said, okay, this is our guy. I know how important the basketball program is to the university.

We're part of something bigger, the university, the athletic department. Penn basketball and the tradition is something that a lot of people take great pride in, and they put me in charge. I couldn't be more thankful. It's truly a blessing to be at my alma mater, to be home, and then to have a group like I had and support from our administration like I have.

You can't do it alone. Unless your administration is joined in the fight with you, you can't do it. So I'm incredibly fortunate, incredibly proud. Can't wait to get back to work.

Q. Just kind of staying in that reflective mode, what do you tell those young men the lessons that they learned this season, tonight, that they can not only apply to, whether they come back next year to play basketball or just go into life and do whatever they need to do going forward?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think I verbalize it exactly like that. When you think about it, I graduated a long time ago, and my roommates were at the game. Those relationships endure. That's some of the things that are lost these days in the transactional world of college basketball. It's not like that at Penn. It's not like that in the Ivy League.

Some guys might leave. I took over, one guy left. At the Power Five level, somebody takes over, you might have to sign 11 guys.

This summer I'll go to two weddings of my former players, and there will be 20 people there that were his teammates or their roommates. That's why I'm so proud of Cam. I just

want them to know that. I want them to know how special these years are.

I never lose sight of the fact that we talk about the business side of this -- wins and losses, points and rebounds. Not in the Ivy League, but in some cases, it's financial compensation. Our kids, it's a needs based institution. But this should be the best four years of their life, and I never lose sight of the fact that I want them to have fun. I never make the environment so stressful that they don't want to come to practice. They're dying to come to practice. They're dying to get to The Palestra at 7:00 in the morning. And I'm dying to get there too because I get to work with these guys.

Q. What's the main thing you take away from this season and what you've built at Penn going into next year?

FRAN McCAFFERY: The word that everybody uses, but it's so true, is I'm trying to build culture. Without it, you'll never have success, and it won't be fun for the players. It won't be the rewarding experience that I want it to be, that it was for me. That's the message.

It's a great opportunity you have to represent this university and play basketball at this level, and hopefully have enough success to participate in what is the greatest extravaganza in sport, the NCAA Tournament.

I always make sure that they enjoy the ride, and I feel so blessed that I've been doing this for as long as I have, and I'm going to keep doing it because I love these guys.

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