

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - VCU vs Illinois

Friday, March 20, 2026

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

## VCU Rams

**Phil Martelli Jr.**

**Jadrian Tracey**

**Terrence Hill Jr.**

**Nyk Lewis**

**Lazar Djokovic**

Media Conference

**Q. Jadrian, you're the veteran, the one with the most experience. Now that you got the win, how did you find yourselves down by 19 points? What led to North Carolina taking the huge lead?**

JADRIAN TRACEY: Credit to them too. They came out and took a lot of shots. We let them get momentum too. With a team like that, we can't let them get any momentum. We talked about they're going to go on runs. How are we going to come back and settle in and stuff?

We got some really good shots in the first half, they just didn't drop. He had some easy layups. He had some easy layups and stuff at the rim, some gimmes. If you take the five, six layups that we missed, shoot, that's only a five-point difference there.

We just settled in and went in the locker room and said, let's keep digging away.

**Q. After the big game last night, you've talked about having the guys hitting you up and giving you support all season. Did you hear from them?**

TERRENCE HILL JR.: Most of the guys were hitting me. Even before the game Zeb was hitting me just to stay in the moment. Phil, Max, all those guys. Jack Clark texted me before the game to say how proud he was of us going through the game. Yeah, I talked to all those guys.



**Q. I don't know how much you've had a chance to look at Illinois yet, but what stands out on the scouting report for Illinois?**

NYK LEWIS: Just the pace of their offense. We got to go over their scout yesterday and today. They had really good offense and really good players. Yeah, just their schemes overall. We've been looking at it a lot.

**Q. Jadrian, you played against Illinois last year at Oregon. It's a different team a little bit. What do you kind of remember about that team that game?**

JADRIAN TRACEY: That game, I'm not going to lie, they broke record on us that game at Matthew Knight Arena. I remember they were hitting 3s. That's all I remember. Trick shots, behind the leg, 3, whatever. They got a rhythm going. If you let a team like that get going, they're hard to stop.

We're ready to defend. Every possession we're locked in. We're going to be focused. They're a pretty good team man, a well-coached team. They've got good players, like Nyk said. You know what I'm saying, they've got to guard us too.

**Q. Terrence, Kylan Boswell prides himself on his defense. What have you seen from him on tape defensively that he does to make him successful?**

TERRENCE HILL JR.: He really gets after the ball a little bit. He actually played at the high school I went to before I went there at encompass. I'm familiar with his game and how he plays. He's just a hard-working player. He prides himself on the defensive end, like you said, but it's no matchup I'm not ready for.

**Q. Nyk, how was that experience playing against Dixon yesterday, your former high school teammate, and what was that rivalry like?**

NYK LEWIS: It's a great experience. Obviously it's a blessing being at March Madness, being able to win that game. It's an experience me and Derek have talked about for a long time. I grew up playing against him. We grew up together in Gonzaga all four years.

Just being able to live my dreams out with one of my close friends is just a great experience.

**Q. Bam, I don't remember which media timeout it was, but I remember looking over, and you were addressing the team pretty emphatically while they were up 19. Any insight as to what you were saying?**

JADRIAN TRACEY: Probably not the same thing I can say up here, but 19 -- we just ain't going to give up, man. You know what I'm saying? We were talking trash on the court, like we were finna to lay down and stuff like that. That ain't been us.

I knew our run was coming. I didn't know when exactly, you know what I'm saying. A lot of us didn't have a good night, but we're glad these guys came out here and played their butt off.

Really all I was saying was stay in it. Whenever we throw our punch, whenever we make our runs, we're going to come, you know what I'm saying? We definitely did that. We got some stops. These guys made some big plays, and they definitely did their thing.

**Q. Lazar, what stands out to you about the Illinois frontcourt? Are you familiar with those guys from the Balkans?**

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: Yeah, I knew a lot of them since I was 14, since I started playing really locked in on basketball. They're just really big, and I feel like the important thing is we're going to contain the first shot really well, but it's just the second shot that we rebound the ball. They're crashing every play.

I feel like, when we get the rebound, we're really good in transition, and I feel like that's where we can hurt them.

**Q. Lazar, to follow up on that, is there one or two of those guys you know better than the others? What do you kind of know about them?**

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: I know the two brothers. I haven't played against them or nothing really, but when I was playing at under-18, they were playing professional. So kind of was watching them play. They're really skilled and big.

**Q. Lazar, you were just talking about them. You look at their lineup, and it looks like European all-stars. How excited are you for that opportunity wearing a VCU shirt going against Illinois?**

LAZAR DJOKOVIC: I told Jimmy Martelli, the assistant

coach, I told him I want to see them. I want to see them. I told them that before the Tournament. I'm going to be really hyped up going into this matchup.

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

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Obviously when you get to this date and this opportunity, it's pretty special. What I told those guys is every time you win in March, the wins feel better and better and better as you go along. Last night felt pretty good. Winning the championship felt good. Last night felt a little bit better.

I told them, if you want to feel a pretty sweet feeling, you go get number two tomorrow. It will certainly be a challenge, I mean, the Number 1 offensive team in the country, the biggest team in the country, one of, if not the best, offensive rebounding team in the country. So our defense will certainly be tested.

One thing I know about these guys is they've responded to every challenge and they'll be ready to go.

**Q. You seem to have a pretty big contingent on your side of non-VCU community members -- Max Crosby, Pat McAfee tweeting out about that yesterday. As you say, these wins get a little more sweeter and a little more national attention and a little more fans behind you. Does that change anything? Does it feel any better?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Honestly, no. We're appreciative of that for sure. Our preparation is our preparation. It doesn't change whether it's a nonconference game against Sanford. It doesn't matter if it's a conference game against Rhode Island. It doesn't matter if it's the second round NCAA Tournament game and people are talking.

Obviously the surroundings of the game are different, but our preparation, our film, our walk through, our on the court, all those things, it doesn't change.

Again, really appreciative of all that and all those people and that recognition, but the fact of the matter is we came here for a business trip. You guys know, I say it, we don't go on field trips, we go on business trips. The first business was to get number one, and we've got to try to get number two tomorrow.

**Q. As you mentioned in your opening statement, tomorrow is a big game against Illinois. What can you take from last night's matchup and apply it to tomorrow's game?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: We have to be us. Being us is being disruptive, is rebounding the ball, getting out and playing in transition and flowing. That has to be us. We talk a lot about that. That's always our last key. We do three keys, three offensive keys, three defensive keys, three specials.

Our third special for every game has always been about us and doing what we do and doing it at the level we need to do it.

They didn't see us for long stretches last night, missing layups and tentative, and kind of a step behind, that wasn't us. Then somewhere in that second half, 12, 13 minutes, we started to find us. There was a couple possessions even right after we went down -- I think one of them they actually scored on, a defensive possession where I felt better -- even though they scored, that looked like us. We were moving like us. We were flying around like us. Yeah, they scored, but we kind of had it back.

From that point on, we kept stacking play after play after play. From there, it was do we have enough time? If we didn't run out of time, we got a shot because we found us. We're going to need that tomorrow. We're going to need to be us from the get-go. That's us being fearless, us attacking, us going after people right from the get-go, regardless of what their jersey says or their seed.

**Q. What is the reason you guys find yourselves down by 19 points? Is there a few things you can point to make sure it doesn't happen again?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: In the first half, the missed layups, which led to their transition. Those were big swings. 7-for-17 on 2s, and they had not blocked a shot at halftime. So that's us missing ten layups. I said it in the post-game, you miss the layups, now your floor balance isn't where it needs to be, now they're getting run-outs, and we're playing from behind.

We did a good job taking care of the ball. We had four turnovers. One was a shot-clock violation, so not even a live ball turnover. We did have two live ball turnover in that half, but missing layups, that hasn't been us all season long. We've been a high percentage turnover team. So that was one thing.

So just a step slow in our rotation. Not quite as active as we needed to be defensively. I think a big factor was being able to get the third guard in there. We took one of the wings out, played one of the wings with Terrence and Nyk and Brandon. That kind of changed it. I was worried about our rebounding with that. Because those guys were able to fly around a little bit more, it led to some of those disruptions and some kind of hesitation on their offensive

side that allowed to us get some stops and get out.

**Q. Phil, Terrence has shown up in some of the biggest moments, biggest games you guys have had against high-major opponents in the conference tournament. What's led to that for him? What gets him up for that? What's the challenge against Kyran Boswell and Illinois tomorrow?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: He's a really good player. He's a super hard worker. He's got a lot of confidence, and he should. We have a lot of confidence in him. He's got a lot of confidence in us. His teammates have a lot of confidence in him.

With that, he's primed for the moment, and you need that, right? You need guys that are not afraid of that moment, not afraid of ball going in or ball going out because sometimes that happens, right? He could have missed that 3, but he would have taken it 100 times out of 100. That's what you need. You need guys that have that fearlessness to them. He certainly has that.

It's because of, again, the work that he puts in. There's not a day that goes by that he's not -- he had an ankle or Achilles, just like a strain in the summertime, and he's like begging J Wall, our trainer to get back out there. Dude, it's July 11th. You're good. You don't need to work out today. He's like, no, I want to be out there. We're going live today. I want to be out there. I'm like we need you on January 11th. We need you on March 11th.

But July 11th is the exact same to him. When you have that type of competitiveness, usually good things happen to you.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned top offense in the country. They like to play that five out offense, high pace, great on the offensive boards. What is a way that you're going to be able to slow them down offensively and make them play your game?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: We have to be disruptive on the ball. Again, that is a big thing for us. That disruption on the ball, being in gaps behind, being physical behind, without fouling. You can be physical without fouling. So we've got to be able to do those things.

They try to pick on mismatches. They try to find mismatches. It's simple actions to get into mismatches that gets you into rotation, and we've got to try to make sure there's no mismatches out there.

Everybody's got to hold their own, but we can't leave anybody on an island. It's got to be -- it's not five

one-on-one matchups out there. It's 5-on-5 basketball. It's our five versus their five. We've got to all be there having each other's backs. It can't be he's guarding him, so he's got to be guarding him. I'm staying over here guarding mine. It's got to be everybody guarding that ball, everybody guarding whatever it is they're trying to attack us with.

**Q. David Mirkovic had 29 points, 17 rebounds last night. What have you seen from him on film, and what do you need your guys to do to help slow him down?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Wagler's gotten a lot of attention and very much deserved, but I'm watching that dude going, holy cow, he's pretty good.

You can tell that he's a poised guy. Some of these guys now are freshmen, but they've been playing -- he's played with older guys for so long and played professionally and things like that. He's got a great feel for the game and can do everything -- I mean, the types of guys that I love, that versatility of one possession he's bringing the ball up, another possession he's posting up, another possession he's getting a catch-and-shoot 3, the other possession he's driving and kicking to somebody else for a 3. He's on the offensive glass.

Yeah, he's one of those guys that does everything. He's super physical. He's super tough. Jimmy, my brother, has got the scout. One of the things he said is you'd better be ready for a 40-minute UFC fight with that dude because he's going to bring. He's going to bring it. We're going to have to be ready to stand toe to toe, block him out, guard him the right way, and make him take tough shots. He'll make tough shots because he's good, but we've got to make him take tough shots, and he gets easy shots for sure.

**Q. Coach, Terrence's journey to this moment has partly been a straight line. He goes to Arizona for prep school, it's not the right fit, he comes back. He's committed to Utah State, decides to go to Utah. Goes to VCU, the next year. What has made him so adaptable to get to this point?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: That's funny. I forgot about him going to Arizona Wednesday before practice, we were going to Bob Jones University. He said I played in this gym. Actually, I didn't even get in the game. That was pretty unique. We were practicing there, and his team had played there, but he hadn't gotten in the game.

Again, the word is resilience. He's one of those resilient guys. Whatever he's faced, whatever he's been through, he doesn't blink. He just goes, attacks the challenge. His

confidence level is super high and doesn't let anything faze that. Again, when you have that, when you have that work ethic and that belief and that resilience, eventually success comes.

I think for everybody -- I said it to them before the championship game. Every single one of those guys has been on this crazy path. It's twists and turns and all over the place, and it brought us all together and created this team, and that's something really special.

Terrence's story is a great one. You could go through that whole locker room, players and staff, and you could find just incredible story after incredible story of finding that perseverance and resilience, and Terrence's is certainly top of that list.

**Q. Your dad coached against Illinois for a few years at Michigan. Anything he said to you about facing a Brad Underwood team?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: No, he just said you've got to be ready. They're going to be tough. They're going to come at you and be physical and all those things.

Again, we don't talk a ton of Xs and Os ironically. I think people are very surprised to hear that. His messages were more about hey, you've got to block out the noise. You've got to get to the task at hand. You've got to make sure you're focused in on what it is you're here for.

All this other stuff is great, but we're here for this, trying to go get number two this weekend. That's usually what he says other than specifics of, hey, this team or that team. But he did say, you know they're going to come at you, they're going to be physical, they're going to be well-coached, and you'd better be ready to handle yourselves.

I do want to quickly -- Commissioner McGlade is sitting here, our commissioner, so I do want to give her a shout-out. She's the most excited Carolina grad that I saw last night. Legendary, legendary player at Carolina, but retiring this year. For two Atlantic-10 teams to be in the round of 32, one, it's a great honor to her and a great testament to what she's done for this conference.

I can tell you this -- and I got word they were pulling hard for us. We're pulling hard for St. Louis. I told those guys, I said, they kicked our ass twice. So I told them, let's go meet in Indy, and you can kick our ass again. I think we'd all sign up for a third matchup.

Congratulations to them. Congratulations to Commissioner McGlade. Thank you for all you've done for the

conference. This conference would not be anywhere near where it is right now without you. We certainly wouldn't be sitting here with two teams in. Thank God we won our championship so we didn't cause the committee an embarrassment of us not being in the tournament. That's for another day.

To have two teams in and have two teams advance, along with multiple teams in the NIT advancing is a great testament to Commissioner McGlade.

I'm very thankful that she's here. I'm very thankful for the conference and for hoping St. Louis pulls out tomorrow, and we can go get two of them on a nice Saturday in the round of 32. Thank you guys.

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