

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026  
Greenville, South Carolina, USA  
Bon Secours Wellness Arena

**Illinois Fighting Illini**  
**Brad Underwood**  
**Kylan Boswell**  
**Andrej Stojakovic**  
**Tomislav Ivisic**  
Media Conference

Illinois 76, VCU 55

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, proud of this group. Congratulations to VCU. I thought their win Thursday night was as impressive as anything I've seen in terms of the comeback and the toughness and resilience. Phil is doing a terrific job there.

Felt very bad that the Lewis kid got hurt very early. He's a terrific player. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention him as what an outstanding player he is.

I thought that our defense was outstanding in the first half. Cam Crocker did a terrific job in game planning. These guys did a terrific job in following that. I thought that Tomi in protecting the front of the paint, I thought we did it without fouling, we didn't put them on the foul line a lot, a team that gets to the foul line a lot. And then I thought Bam was excellent on Hill.

But Andrej, what a first half. On the offensive side, on the glass, sparked us, was tremendous. His athleticism, the dunk he had that kind of ended a little dry spell for us was huge.

But 16 first half points, a lot of foul pressure on them was a huge help tonight.

Very pleased and excited to have the opportunity to continue to move on.

**Q. Andrej, they had come back to -- you built an early**



**lead but they came back and then you scored nine straight to close the half. What were you thinking at that point? Tell me about what happened there with your game.**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, at this point of the year, those runs are going to happen. Every team is going to make their runs and the ball just happened to find me in the right position, and we do a great job of spacing the floor, hence our versatility on the team, and just took what the defense was giving me really.

**Q. Andrej, just wanted to get your thoughts on the chemistry you have with this group. I saw you in the postgame interview, all your teammates came over. Share that moment with us.**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, I'll say this over and over again. I think that we're even closer off the court. We see how hard we work every single day, and we understand how much this means to us. It just translates on the court. We trust each other. We love each other. We've just got to keep it going.

**Q. Could you guys speak to Z and his block and obviously that poster dunk, your impressions?**

KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, he's been doing that all year. He makes crazy plays in transition. I was coming down the court, and I just see this seven-footer running behind me and I knew to dump it off to him.

He's a freak athlete, makes tremendous plays for us, so that was a crazy play.

**Q. For all of you, just getting to the Sweet 16 for the second time in three years under Brad, what does it mean to you guys?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: I mean, it's what we work for. It restarted last game, and we understand that that first game against Penn was the only guaranteed one and we've got to work for each one moving forward. That's our mindset and going to continue to work.

**Q. For Kyle and Tomi. You guys were in this position last year, second round, and didn't have the results**



**you wanted. What was different for you guys heading into this game tonight?**

KYLAN BOSWELL: I think a lot of that came down to a lot of maturity on this team, a group of older guys who understand what it takes to win. Throughout the year we've put ourselves in a lot of situations that were tough, and this was another game, just the same thing for us. It was just another hard game.

But at the end of the day, we trust our process. We continuously just focus on ourselves, especially these one-day preps. You've just got to continuously work on yourself. We get to go move on, survive and advance.

**Q. When VCU made that run to make it pretty competitive, they got the VCU crowd into the game. What kept you guys' composure to just stay focused in the moment and just take off from that place, like it energized you as well?**

KYLAN BOSWELL: Just trusting our work, trusting our process. We talked about that coming into the game. They're a team that's living on runs. At the end of the day that's just what March Madness is about, that's how the game of basketball goes, it's a game of runs.

Continually focusing on ourselves and just trusting all the work we point in all year to get to this point. Nothing would steer us away. Big effort tonight for us defensively for sure kept us in the lead.

**Q. Andrej, you came to Illinois and were asked to play a different role and obviously been challenged in a number of different ways. Does this make it all worth it and is this what you envisioned when you came here?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, that's exactly what it is. I think me coming here and getting to this point, just like every other newcomer to come to this team this year, all we can do is help this team go as far as we can. We came here for a reason, because we believe in this program, and we're going to continue to control what we can, and that's how much we work at it and with what intensity we play.

**Q. You saw what Hill did against North Carolina. What was the strategy for trying to contain him?**

KYLAN BOSWELL: We knew his ability to shoot from beyond the arc. For us we knew he wanted to get downhill to his right. The whole purpose in these times in March Madness, with a player who has the ability to score like him, you have to make stuff difficult for him. His catches, nothing easy. I think we just did a great job of doing that tonight.

**Q. Brad, it was VCU's worst performance of the year points per possession. What did you think was the biggest factor in this game?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, I thought Kylan had a lot to do with it early. I thought we had a plan for place for Hill on both sides, actually. But he did a nice job. We cross-matched early. We put Mirk on -- Djokovic and then Tomi was playing Evans, and just trying to clog the paint up a little bit.

And then we had a plan every time he screened, Hill screened, we wanted to show on those screens, to disrupt the ball handler. That's something we haven't done a ton, but our guys executed in a flawless way.

But yeah, it worked. Then we did a really good job of not putting them on the foul line. We talked a lot about that. We're one of the best teams in the country at not fouling. They didn't shoot a free throw the first half, they shot six for the game, and I think 23% of their points come at the foul line. It was a big important piece for us.

And the Djokovic shot over 200 free throws over the year. He's top 10 in the country in free-throw attempts. So keeping him off the line was important, and that matchup was really key.

**Q. For Andrej, can you speak to the luxury of having a guy with that type of spark coming off the bench for you guys?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, it was unfortunate we got to this point from this standpoint. He got hurt, and we were in a really good spot, and he got hurt and had that high ankle sprain. We got going with Jake, we found a little comfort, and then it was both he and Kylan coming back about the same time, and it wasn't real comforting in the middle of league play or towards the end of league play throwing both of them back in when they've been a little rusty.

So we stayed with Jake and he's been phenomenal, really cerebral, really smart. Drej has just found a niche and I'm so comfortable with him knowing we've got one of our best offensive players coming in off the bench, and then he proved again tonight defensively he was very good on that end, as well.

**Q. Coach, what is it that you've learned from this game as well as the last game that you didn't know about your team that you can take into the next game?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, I think there's a couple things. One, we're 34 or 35 games in, whatever we're in,

and there's not a lot we don't know. I'm really glad to see us -- I used the term before the tournament, "just let it rip." We've got to play that way, and we've got to play loose and we've got to play free. Whether it was -- Keaton and Mirk have been so instrumental throughout our processes here late, and now it wasn't them having the night, it was other guys.

Glad to see Tomi get going, glad to see Z get it cranked up. I thought Ben's defense was outstanding, he hit a couple threes. So it's just a well-rounded group. I've known that, it's just nice to start seeing it.

**Q. Yesterday you mentioned that you wanted to avoid live ball turnovers. In the first half you gave up some of those and then getting back in the game. What was your message at halftime --**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Just that, jump stop -- well, we had three offensive fouls called in the first half. Those were three of our eight turnovers. We had two travels. We haven't traveled all year. Give them credit for maybe forcing those. But I thought our ball presence the second half, they back tap a lot. Usually those get called fouls, or at least they have been in the Big Ten. They weren't. We lost a couple of those.

But our defense was so good the first half, if they didn't have those runs in transition -- I think they had 10 points off our turnovers. What did they shoot the first half, 32, I think? 32 percent from the field and 22 from the three. You take those away, and that defense got real good.

**Q. You spoke a second ago about Ben and his defense. Have you coached a player that has had --**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: No. No. It's a monumental change, and it's just a mindset that he's gone through. It's the maturity of Ben.

Ben has always been very assignment sound. Now the physicality of Adam Fletcher, the weight, the strength, it's just a mindset that that young man has taken on.

He loves the challenge. We're putting him on point guards or 5 men, and he guarded all those guys tonight. Huge credit to him.

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