

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Illinois vs UConn

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Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

UConn Huskies

Dan Hurley

Stephon Castle

Donovan Clingan

Alex Karaban

Tristen Newton

Cam Spencer

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for joining us. Coach Hurley, we want to get some opening thoughts before we open for questions. Thank you.

DAN HURLEY: Obviously, excited to get another opportunity this year in an Elite Eight game to play a really high-quality team and have a chance to -- 40 minutes or however long it takes, for a chance to get back to a Final Four.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions?

Q. Dan, does Illinois remind you of any teams you've played this year, any Big East teams with their physicality, with their offensive punch or anything like that? Can you draw any similarities between any teams you've played?

DAN HURLEY: I think there's different elements with the way that they space the court. With Marquette in terms of the offensive end, although Marquette is unique. Some defensive principles maybe from Creighton. Yeah, different elements.

Obviously, we watched their game versus Marquette in the non-conference, the one they played at Illinois. So there was some familiarity coming in.



Q. For any of the players, we've talked with Coach quite a bit, and Coach has talked with us quite a bit about his list of superstitions. What do you guys think of Coach's superstitions? And have you developed any as a result of all of the things he has?

ALEX KARABAN: Whatever works, works. It's worked well for his entire coaching career. Why not continue it? I've definitely picked on the superstitious stuff, whether it's that with socks. Cam and I with each other going into the hotel room. I've got to go first, and then wait, and then he's got to go. It's just weird -- he knows what I'm talking about. You know what I'm talking about.

CAM SPENCER: That's true.

Q. A quick one for Dan, and then one for Tristen. Genuine question. You have things with the M & Ms. The M & M blue is a different shade than Illinois blue. Is that a different factor in what you do tomorrow?

DAN HURLEY: I thought I was safe. I wasn't focused on the blue. I was so focused on the orange.

Q. Okay. Tristen, this year versus the team from last year, what element is here that gives you confidence that maybe was missing or just maybe a dial down when we talk about beating a team like Illinois, getting to the Final Four? What's the biggest dynamic difference from this group versus last season?

TRISTEN NEWTON: Besides the players, obviously, last year we had the same format, defense, rebounding, sharing the ball that got us to a National Championship. We carried that over to this year and have had a successful year.

I don't see many differences besides the players. We do the same routine, do the same scout and prepare the same. I wouldn't say there are too many big differences.

Q. Coach, you talk about culture a lot. What's it like in real time to see that happen in such dominating fashion, especially in the tournament?



DAN HURLEY: Just the culture piece, it's all about just getting the right people together, like-minded people, people that are willing so sacrifice, people that are willing to care about the group, sacrifice parts of themselves for the overall success of the group.

Because everyone's going to get what they deserve in the end. There's no more secrets. Players that are NBA-level players are going to get drafted. You're going to play in the NBA. It's not like it was years ago where there's these guys that don't end up making it because they were some hidden secret.

You know, everyone's going to end up playing at the level that their talent dictates. So while you're wearing the college uniform, you know, play for the win. We've got guys that play to win.

Q. Donovan, Coach talked the other day about you coming in after last year and saying you weren't ready, you wanted to come back. What went into that decision? What did you think wasn't ready? Was having a chance to win two in a row any part of the decision?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Yeah. I love UConn. I love being here. I love the guys in the locker room. I love the coaching staff. I really feel like I wanted to come back and prove what I could do. College game's as fun as it gets. Winning a National Championship, definitely wanted to try to compete for another one. Just realized how fun it is and how great winning is.

So I just wanted to come back and try to battle and just do it with a new team.

Q. Was it more about the experience or was there part of your game you still wanted to work on?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Everything. Obviously, there's always room for improvement. I always want to get better. I always want to have a new team. I love UConn. I love being here and I just want to keep winning.

Q. Guys, let's play a little game here. Let's describe your coach in one word. Each one of you. I'll start, if you want. Do you want me to start, Donovan?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Sure.

Q. Lunatic.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I like that one. Who said that?

DAN HURLEY: Let them say it. You're like leading them.

Q. Not at all. I would never lead.

THE MODERATOR: Let's start with Stephon.

STEPHON CASTLE: Loud.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Competitive.

ALEX KARABAN: Passionate.

TRISTEN NEWTON: You took my word. Relentless.

CAM SPENCER: A winner.

DAN HURLEY: Let's go, boys. Got my back! Culture.

Q. Question for Tristen and Alex. Curious about Cam's versatility. He's a shooter. Everyone knows that. His passing, play-making. Can you speak to the way he affects the game?

ALEX KARABAN: He can beat anybody in so many different way, whether it's his shot or play-making. He really helps us create a new look offensively. Teams worry about him so much. He's extremely unselfish. He's going to make the shot or make the unselfish play. He's super easy and super fun to play with on offense.

TRISTEN NEWTON: Cam is a great teammate. He's going to do whatever it takes to win. He dives on the floor, he gets steals, he moves the ball. Obviously, he shoots well. With his shooting skill, he can make it to the basket and plays. He's an all-around player and has been good for the team this year.

Q. Dan, did you have superstitions when you were a player? What were they?

DAN HURLEY: That was a long time ago. No. I just think you have more time as a coach. You're in the locker room by yourself. Especially as a head coach, you're in the locker room by yourself for a while, just by yourself, and you have a lot of time by yourself. So it leads to these things piling up.

Q. What about at St. Benedict's?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, it started there. I think the M&M's probably started there.

Q. Anything else?

DAN HURLEY: There? Just prayer. You know, I pray too right before. We talk to these guys. They go out at the



eight-minute mark, I go and say a quick prayer. So my faith's always been real important to me.

Q. Cam, you've probably been asked this before. But the comparison of kind of Big East basketball, what you went through this season, versus Big Ten basketball. You're going to play them. So are they similar? One harder, more physical? Any comparison you might make?

CAM SPENCER: I would say the physicality is pretty similar. Big, strong, athletic people in both leagues. I think the Big East probably a little bit faster. The Big Ten probably a little more of a half-court offense kind of a league.

But like I said, both very physical leagues.

Q. Alex and Dan also, if you could weigh in, it's been said in the past, Geno among others, that this regional final, the eight, is the hardest obstacle on the way to the championship. This is the toughest game.

Alex, you went through this last year with Gonzaga. What were the feelings going into that as well?

ALEX KARABAN: We were super energetic to know how hard it is to make it to the Elite Eight and the energy surrounding the Elite Eight. We were super excited. Making it back to Elite Eight is special. It's hard to do two times in a row. I think every round is hard in March Madness, the first and second round. All of them are hard and all of them equal the same value; you win and move on.

Really super energized and excited about all of them. You're just blessed with the opportunity to be in these type of games.

DAN HURLEY: First-round games are rough. I remember last year, pretty nerve wracking going into this one with everything that's on the table. Going into the National Championship game, not wanting to lose in the National Championship game. I think for us, feels different. We broke through last year. We've established a level. Maybe we feel a little less pressure as an organization because we feel like we've established a level now of where our program's at, that we're going to be in this spot moving forward. Obviously, this year and moving forward.

I don't think we feel the same anxiety. We have tremendous respect for our opponent, know how hard tomorrow is going to be. But we've established a level that we expect to be back to.

Q. Dan, what do you recall about the conversations with Donovan coming off of last year and his need to come back this year? And what do you think of his body of work this year and his development, despite some injuries?

DAN HURLEY: With Donovan, obviously, NIL has changed things for college athletes. There's no rush to get to professional sports, the NBA, the NFL with what you can earn as a college athlete. If you're physically and emotionally not ready to go into a man's world and your game is not there, you're emotionally, in terms of maturation, not ready to be in that world with grown-ass men, fighting for your life on a daily basis in that league, then you should return to college until you're prepared to be a rotation player in the NBA where you can have a long and successful career.

The objective is not getting drafted to the NBA. The objective is to have a 12 to 15-year career in the NBA and Donovan wasn't ready for that last year. He's a very self-aware kid.

You could see his impact once he's healthy. He wasn't healthy to start the year. Now he's healthy. He's in great form, and there's few players in the country that impact the game like him.

Q. Donovan, other than the context of this tournament run, over the entire season, have you and your teammates taken this season as a title defense, like what you won last year, you are trying to retain what is yours or has it been draw a line, blank slate. This is all about moving forward and we're not necessarily using what we already have as extra motivation?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Definitely after this summer, when we got all the new guys, the freshmen and Cam, really just leaving that in last season and focusing on doing it with a new team.

Really, it's not about defending. It's just trying to go out and win another one and doing whatever we can to do that. This is a special group of guys that is coached at the highest level. We're just ready for what's ahead of us.

Q. I'm going to give Coach a chance to answer this and then the four players next to Stephon Castle, I'll give you a chance to think.

When did you know that this freshman would be the perfect fit for your program? What was your first encounter or two like with this kid?

DAN HURLEY: I think just during the unofficial visits,

official visits, you spend time around him, you get to know Quan and Stacey and the people Steph has around him. The physical attributes, the traits, the competitiveness, the love of the game. All that stuff is there.

For me it's when you spend time with him on the visit and know the family has the right inner circle around him.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Really, his official visits, the dinners, the official visit dinners, hanging around with him on campus. His family's great. He's a good kid and he's the best defender that you see. We put him on the best players every game. He's a special player, special kid.

TRISTEN NEWTON: They do a great job of recruiting the right players. Obviously, if Coach wants somebody on the team and says he's here going to help us, they're going to help us.

My first interaction with Steph was I think on Instagram, honestly. We were talking about the jersey number. Talking about getting number 2. He couldn't have it.

Besides that, he's a great teammate, great guy on and off the court. Glad he's our teammate this year.

Q. Dan, could you speak to the different personalities you have in the backcourt, Tristen, Cam, Steph, Hass? How have they been able to mesh?

DAN HURLEY: Getting players with a lot of life to them. Avoiding zombies and dead-heads on your roster. Outgoing, different types of personality. It helps you in these bigger moments. I think that's something that we spend a lot of time thinking about with a couple of the years where we didn't play our best in March. Get guys that are alive, that aren't going to shrink when the lights get bright in March.

It's a very diverse locker room. I know they have a lot of fun in there, and it's a lively place.

Q. Tristen and Alex, Coach has said multiple times that Donovan's as impactful of a player as there is in college basketball. I'm curious in your eyes, what is that impact?

ALEX KARABAN: I think it starts on the defensive end with him. When he was out for those five games in the middle of the season, we weren't as good defensively. We didn't have the rim protection. We didn't have the presence inside that intimidate other teams attacking the paint. It started with the defensive end with him.

Offensively, lob threat, post-ups. He really opens up

everything else for the guards and the shooters. So, I mean, it's really both ends. More importantly, it's on the defensive end we needed him.

TRISTEN NEWTON: He pretty much covered it all. It starts with defense. He affects all shots around the rim, gets good rebounds. I think the most underrated part of his game, for me personally, he's a good screen setter. I'm open off all his screens. If it's on or off the ball, he sets great screens. Throw it up to him, he's going to get it. He's the most impactful player in the country, we would say so.

THE MODERATOR: You guys are all set. Thank you.

Q. Dan, as you may be aware, it's been a long time since anyone's repeated. With all the stuff that's gone on in the sport, do you think it's getting harder to do that with the transfer portal, or do you think it's going to get easier because you can bring someone in?

DAN HURLEY: Oh, it's harder. Its way harder. Coaching's harder. The game is way more sophisticated, right? I mean, just the players are more skilled. They are more versatile. So many different types of teams with different tactics offensively, defensively.

Obviously, you're managing your roster with the portal, with NIL. I mean, for us, you better be a more skilled coach these days because you're dealing with a lot more stuff.

For us, I think we've made it look easy in these past two tournaments, but it's hard. We do the hard things really, really well, like the defense, the rebounding, the way that we play at the offensive end of the court.

So, yeah, I mean, it's tough. It's not easy. It's going to get tougher. Unless somebody -- get like a commissioner that gets this thing a little bit more organized and under control. We could really use a commissioner.

It's such an incredible sport. We've got the greatest sport event that this country has on a yearly basis that catches the imagination of the whole country, casuals, non-sports fans. Everyone's got a bracket. You've got this incredible product that's marketed horribly outside of March. It's an incredible sport. You better be a better coach. We need a commissioner.

Q. You've been frequent in your outspokenness about your opposition to the transfer portal being open during the tournament. I think a lot of people in your profession would share that opinion.

I'm curious in your position, UConn, if you have found

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

yourself in the past couple weeks in the rare spot where, instead of having a staff that has to work the portal, work the back channels, if anything, you've had people approach either you, your staff, and say, hey, how can we get our guys involved in what you're doing? If you've had to deal with that, if you've almost had to push the brakes on everyone as you try and do this and keep all the focus on your team?

DAN HURLEY: We have Tom Moore in a pseudo-GM role, trying to project out what the roster's going to look like. Obviously, we have players that we know won't return. Then you have some younger players that you know are going to have heavy, heavy interest in terms of Stephon and Donovan and AK.

So those things we're kind of having casual conversations about that, but we really are just trying to focus on next practice, studying the heck out of this Illinois team, staying in the moment, staying present with that. It hasn't hurt us in the past. That's the way we've always handled things.

We're not good at tampering or cheating. We've never tried that and we've still been very successful. So we want to play out the season and, obviously, we'll deal with our roster situations. But we just, as a program, we want to have a high-level culture and the respect of our peers to not be one of those programs that's trying to steal players off other teams in season.

Q. A quick follow-up. Last year, you spoke about how you had to take a few Zoom interviews with transfers. Have you put your foot down, line in the sand, the whole thing on if you're fortunate enough to go to Arizona, like, we're not doing that again? Or is it a state of the business where it's almost out of your control?

DAN HURLEY: For me?

Q. For you specifically and this team. That must not have been what you wanted to do a year ago when you're trying to win a title and you got assistants hopping on Zoom. I wonder if you're intent on not having to repeat that or if it's just an unavoidable reality.

DAN HURLEY: What we've tried to do, as players have gone in, there may be an interest in, in terms of how personnel things go for us, either portal or early entry draft. We've had Tom, acting as a pseudo GM for us maybe make an initial call of interest. But, yeah, I'm not actively -- I think I've called a high school player that's available and had a phone conversation. But just think it's our practice for me and Kimani and Luke to lock in on team and to take

this season as far as we can go.

If we lose players because we're moving slower, again, it hasn't hurt us the past two years.

Q. Dan, you talked a lot about what college basketball is facing. The issue of gambling being so out there. For those of us in a certain age, it's strange enough to live in a space where gambling is so present, I'm curious how you feel about that. If gambling to you is a threat because the kids can be targeted by people. Or if it's because they're vulnerable and then you're looking at bad stuff, point shaving, things like that.

What do you see as the threats?

DAN HURLEY: I think you worry about people getting close to the players. Anyone involved in your program, whether student-managers or what have you, the antennas are up.

Now, with players, with this NIL opportunity, it's not like they need to bet on games in college with that insider information because they need the cash. These kids now are in a position to begin investing money, taking care of family, having family travel. NIL has been great.

You worry about the people around the players and how easily accessible it is. We play and practice at the XL Center, not far from a window where we can see the gambling going on.

Q. Dan, how do you go about building a strong connection with your players and how important is that to your team's success?

DAN HURLEY: A ton. You invest every second that you can in them, that the NCAA allows both on the court and off the court. Truly, you just pour everything you have into them. Your family is intertwined with your program. I think players sense that. They feel that.

My players will accept the hard coaching from me because -- and our staff because they know how much we love them. They know how much we're trying to prepare them, toughen them up, teach them, help them grow as men, develop new skills quickly. All things that will add value to their lives.

We're relentless for them. We're literally giving everything we've got to them while they're on campus now. I wouldn't want to play for me for 10 years, 12 years. I mean, I wouldn't want to play for this staff for 8, 10, 12, 15 years.

We go hard for these guys while they're on campus, and

that's why, I think, you see the bond the way it is. In some cases, it's eight months, it's ten months, it's two or three years. You've got to do that at a sprinter's pace because it's such a short window where you're trying to prepare these guys for the rest of their lives. Success. The stuff that they need to learn as men.

Q. What are the two or three most important pieces of advice that either Jim Calhoun or other veteran coaches you have talked to about handling the later stages of March?

DAN HURLEY: For me, certainly, shortening up practices. I think that trusting your team, I think from Coach Calhoun and Geno, have really tried to hammer that home with me as a season's gone on, shortening those practices.

And then I think the leadership, the public persona, I think Geno and Coach Calhoun have had heavy influence in how I try to carry myself this time of year. As a UConn coach, the confidence you've got to display in-house and in front of you guys because of what UConn represents in March and April.

Q. To follow up what you mentioned about Donovan the other day, what is it about his game you saw could improve if he stuck around and what kind of growth have you seen from him? How remarkable is it that a guy can look at the NBA and say no, I'm good, I'll wait?

DAN HURLEY: Obviously, all the defensive things. Now that he's healthy, all the movement and the ball screen defense, plus the rim protection. He's got a unique skill set for somebody who is 7'2", 7'3".

You can see somebody that's very comfortable passing and handling the ball away from the basket, which is so critical in the NBA game today with the five-out.

And I think if you watch him in pregame warmups, you can see that the shooting, as he gets into an NBA organization, you'll see the shooting with him. You'll see a guy that eventually will be able to step away and make shots. People see Jokic, what he looks like when he's 25, 26 years old. When he was 20, he wasn't making 24-foot threes and doing all the things you're seeing him do the last couple years.

So Donovan has an ability to develop new skills rapidly and you'll see that when he gets to the NBA.

Q. (No microphone).

DAN HURLEY: Yeah. But he comes -- a great family raised him, and Bristol's kept him humble and grounded.

He's a Connecticut kid. He loves Connecticut. He loves college. Once these guys leave college, they're not going to be on teams like this again that feel the way we feel about each other ever again.

You're going to go into an NBA organization, and it's going to be business. It's going to be man you-know-what. It's not going to be like this in terms of the way the group feels about each other; the brotherhood, the camaraderie. And I think he wanted another year of that.

Q. It has not been a recurring trope for this team to win close games, but I am curious how you are trying to guard against or prepare your team for if it's caught in a one-possession game with two minutes to go tomorrow night or if you -- do you and your staff have any control over your team's composure when it comes to that? How much does that weigh on you if you're not blowing them out?

DAN HURLEY: We've played under pressure on a daily basis because our practice is very intense. I do think that helps us to a degree. At MSG, that St. John's game was not -- that game was tight, and we made plays later in the second half in an electric building to get it to double figures.

The Marquette game in the Big East finals was not a runaway for us. It was a tight game that we got separation in the second half. We've played close games during the year.

I just think expectation in the game versus Illinois, Illinois is one of the best teams in the country. One of the best teams in the country. We expect a 40-minute war going into every game that we go into. I know you all see the end of that clip when I came into the locker room and said, "We keep blowing these teams out."

Well, they missed the first part of that which was, "Man, I don't know how we're blowing these teams out in this setting. You guys are special."

So we go into every game -- you know, San Diego State, we didn't think we'd be plus 27 on the backboard versus that rebounding team. We didn't think we'd be a team like that, that beat the team that -- that beat the Auburn team that everyone felt like could make a deep, deep run in this tournament by 30.

So you go into it thinking it's going to be a full 40-minute war. And we've systematically been able to break teams down.

Q. Dan, you talk rebounding. These are two of the top ten rebound margin teams in the country. How do you



**see the rebounding battle playing out tomorrow, and
where do you maybe have an edge?**

DAN HURLEY: It's going to be a bloody battle. It's a rebounding war tomorrow. It's going to be a bloody one. The Big East and the Big Ten, two of the toughest leagues. You get real men playing in these two conferences.

So when the ball goes up, whoever's fastest to it, whoever makes that first violent contact and then continues to improve their position. They're an excellent rebounding team. We're an excellent rebounding team. We both go to the offensive glass. I think tomorrow is going to be a fun game. I think the two top offenses in the country, NBA players up and down both roster.

I know they're hungry to break through and get to a Final Four. We're hungry to get back to a Final Four. We're two of the truly best teams in the country.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Good luck tomorrow.

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