

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Illinois vs Houston

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Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Kylan Boswell

Jake Davis

Zvonimir Ivisic

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, it's a pleasure to be here. Quite an honor to be here. You're one of 16 that are still playing and still have the opportunity to try to win a National Championship. I've got a great opponent, the University of Houston, played in the championship game last year, one of the legends in the game in Kelvin Sampson as their coach, tremendous respect for how hard he gets his guys to play, his successes. We know we got to play extremely well, can't flinch against these guys.

But I think we're up for that challenge. We look forward to the opportunity and it should be a hard-fought game.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. Houston plays a very muck-up style of the game. I was curious to see how the Florida scrimmage helped you guys and what lessons you've imparted to the team into this matchup.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, they're different, I think, in the fact that Houston's not as big as Florida was. But they're a very guard-dominated team, I would say, in terms of their guards take 60 percent of their field goal attempts. But just from the standpoint of rebounding, Florida was one of the best rebounding teams in the country. You've got to meet that physicality. You have to meet that tenacity. It's every trip.



I think the one thing that Houston does an elite job of is their back taps. They tip it back for their guards. But I think we're a good rebounding team as well, and we've proven that throughout the course of the season and we've got to make them hit us as well. We learned that in the Florida game.

Q. Having a point guard, a freshman, yourself, what have you seen on the other side with Flemings and sort of how he's mixed in with the how they do things?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, very similar in terms of -- I think Coach's approach to it has been very similar to what ours is. He's turned the ball over, he's turned the reins over, and rightfully so. He's earned that respect. He's a tremendous athlete. He's been a big shot maker for them. He competes at a very high level. As does Keaton. It took us a little bit throughout the season, especially early, to get Keaton in that role.

But they're both, I would say, mature beyond their years in terms of poise and, obviously, the successes both those young men have had this season are pretty paralleled in terms of their growth and what their impact's been on their team.

Q. Do you have any issues with the fairness of playing a team that's basically playing a home game in this tournament?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You know, I've been asked that before, and I'll be honest, I couldn't care less. And I'm going to sound really kind of selfish here. I'm an old JuCo ball coach. I drove 16-passenger vans. I drove from Dodge City, Kansas, to Mesa, Arizona, for a basketball game, for a tournament, in a bus.

If you had told me back then that I'm getting to coach basketball in the Sweet 16 and play Houston, I would sign up for it, I would crawl to get there. If we want to beat them, no matter where we play them, we would have to play great. Guess what? We're going to have to do that tomorrow. And I think they're going to have to play well if they want a chance to beat us.

So we've won on the road. We've been pretty successful doing that in the Big Ten. So I don't pay too much attention



to it. I'm just grateful for the opportunity and, you know, playing Houston's a challenge enough, it doesn't matter where.

Q. Your team is first nationally in number of free throws allowed on defense, the famous no fouling. Houston is 351st on getting to the line. How do you set up a game like that where you don't send people to the line and they don't try to get to the line?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, they're going to shoot a lot of threes. It's still one of the opportunities to -- you know, we're going to have to do what we do. We're going to have to -- you still have to guard the basketball without fouling. Kingston's very good at getting downhill. But it's not something we talk about a great deal and say, Hey, we got to guard them without fouling or, you know, or they're a team that doesn't go. To me, that's just kind of the flow of the game. How the game's called, you have to adjust. So it's not a real high priority. We know we don't foul very often. We practice it every day. If they don't go, they don't go.

Q. You probably talked about this a lot all season, but Keaton was a guy who was under-recruited by some schools. How quickly did you know that you had a difference-maker on your hands?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, we knew we had a really talented young man. Until you coach them -- and I think Keaton's one of the fabulous stories about what the college experience should be about. The expectation coming in wasn't to be a pro or to get rich or to be famous. It was to be a winner and participate on a basketball team. We knew he was very talented. He weighed 178 pounds. I think today he was 192. He's gained weight.

But until you coach them -- and especially freshmen, until you coach them, they deal with adversity, they get in a different environment, you don't know what you have. And we didn't know what we had. We knew we had a very talented player that was going to be a great player at some point. His maturity, his poise, that exceeded everything that I ever would have thought. And it's a tribute to him, his upbringing, his parents, his coaching to this point. But he has been a joy to have on our team because he's a great teammate. He's just a wonderful human being.

Q. Sharp does a really good job on the defensive side of turning those turnovers into quick transition. How do you guys as a team just balance your offensive attack while also trying to keep him out of that some in transition?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, live ball turnovers are huge.

It's one of the things that we haven't, we've done a pretty good job of most of the season is not turning the ball over. They're going to bring two to the ball in every ball screen or every post-up. You got to make great decisions. So you play advantage/disadvantage basketball a lot and we got to make good decisions. Houston capitalizes on those. They hunt threes in transition. And they have got guys who can make 'em. Uzan, Sharp, those two especially are great at capitalizing on that. So we got to protect the ball, there's no doubt about that.

Q. For those who may not watch the team as much this year, with the twins, the seven footers, what's that dynamic like on the court having their ability and I think they have the ability to step out and shoot the 3. What's just having that kind of player like?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, it's been, you know, I call it cooking with gas so to speak. You've got two seven-foot-plus guys that can shoot it. They're both highly intelligent players. They know how to set screens. We haven't played them as much together as maybe we had hoped, just due to some injuries and timing of things. But Z is scary athletic and fast and blocks shots. Tommy is more of the physical type, so there's a difference in those two. But yet offensively they can both really shoot it, make great decisions, and have a really high understanding of how to play the game.

Q. You talked about how one of your strong suits for the team is rebounding, and Houston is good at rebounding as well. So I assume it's going to be a coin flip who is going to win the battle. What's something you believe, in watching their style of play, where you can really capitalize on?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I don't know if there's a specific thing. I think it's a 40-minute game. I think you have to have a mental focus to block guys out. I think their bigs are all elite at wedging and doing those things. I think there's a physicality that they bring. We like to think we bring that same thing. But I think it's the consistency of being able to match that for 40 minutes. We like to take pride in that, I know Kelvin takes pride in that with his guys, we'll see who does it better.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you, Coach.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Thank you.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the players.

Q. Jake, when you transferred from Mercer to this

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level of basketball is this kind of what you imagined? I mean, in the Sweet 16, playing Houston, national TV, just curious what this moment is like for you.

JAKE DAVIS: Yeah, it's great, obviously. This was kind of one of the goals I wanted to get to after transferring. I wanted to go to a higher level, come to a program like Illinois where we're competing for a national championship every year. Obviously the moment's bittersweet, obviously we're not done, we want to keep winning obviously. But it's great. This was the goal, I'm glad I got here, and it's an awesome moment.

Q. When you look at Houston on film just the rebounding that they do and sort of how they tip and get the extra rebounds, what do you see from them knowing that you guys are also a good rebounding team?

KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, I mean, Coach Sampson and Coach Underwood have the same philosophies, I feel like, with crashing the glass and rebounding effort. So at the end of the day it's just going to be about boxing out your man, not getting swept from behind. I feel like we'll be fine. We've done it all year going against each other in practice. So it will just be another day.

Q. What do you think about the fairness of playing against a team that's basically playing a home game in this tournament?

ZVONIMIR IVISIC: Yeah, we're not worried about the crowd. We expected that it was going to be a good crowd here and we play Houston, we don't play the fans.

KYLAN BOSWELL: At the end of the day we knew we show up, coming to Houston, it's going to be packed out with red and white. Our fans travel really well, so we'll see what tomorrow looks like. But at the end of the day we can't let that faze us and effect how we're going to play.

JAKE DAVIS: Yeah, kind of what they all said, they're the higher seed, so it is what it is. I think we've been battle tested throughout the year on the road. I think we played really well on the road against good teams in their place. I don't think this is anything different. We're coming here to win with that mindset, so.

Q. Kylan or Jake, with Z's big moment and it being all over social media all week in the game, I guess, one, has his head gotten too big, and two, what was it like for the team to see Illinois basketball -- I mean that's the furthest I've seen a single play spread around social media in years. So tell me what that was like.

KYLAN BOSWELL: No, his head's definitely not gotten too big, that's for sure. But that's him. He makes highlight plays like that. I happened to see him running across half and he caught it from the three-point line, and one, two from the free-throw line, that was crazy. But, yeah, I mean, he's a seven-footer, he's going to dunk it like that, so at the end of the day it's just Big Z being Big Z.

JAKE DAVIS: I would say we're just accustomed to it. He be doing that all the time in practice. He finally got to do it in the game. Yeah, it should be blowing up. What he did was pretty freaky, so... pretty good. I don't know.

Q. Kylan, their guards, Sharp and Uzan, veteran guys. What have you seen sort of from them and how they, especially on the defensive end, how they play?

KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, they're some of the best guards in the nation. They know what it takes to win, playing a National Championship game last year. It will be a great matchup for us. At the end of the day, especially with Flemings also being in that lineup. So we'll continue to watch film on them, figure out tendencies, things of that such, and be ready to play tomorrow.

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