

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

Wednesday, March 25, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

**Houston Cougars**

**Kelvin Sampson**

**Emanuel Sharp**

**Kingston Flemings**

**Milos Uzan**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



learning how to form a bond with your teammates, and creating a family atmosphere. It's just led to us having a great team this year.

**Q. I know you said you're just focused on the game, but is it pretty special to be able to play basically a home game at this level of the tournament?**

MILOS UZAN: No, I mean, for sure it's special just for our fans to be able to come. It's a lot closer. It saves them a lot more money, especially our families as well. But last year we played Purdue in Indiana. It doesn't really give you too much of an advantage, honestly. Every team here is good, and, yeah, it doesn't really give you too much advantage. I think we just continue with the same preparation and live with the results.

**Q. What do you see from Illinois on film? This is a team that's averaging about 85 points a game and you guys pride yourself on defense. Sampson has been talking it all year and you've been showing it on court. What are you seeing from this Illinois offense?**

KINGSTON FLEMINGS: Yeah, they're a consensus top 2 offense this year, and they play super hard. They hunt matchups a lot. Keaton Wagler, one of the best freshmen out, so he's the engine to their team, but they also have Mirkovic, who is great post, great passer. I think the best thing they do is offensive rebounding. When the ball goes up, that's when the game really starts. They go and they crash the rebounding, they are No. 3 in the country.

So when you rebound that much, you're getting rebounds off your misses, you have more chances to score. Just knowing how hard it is to get offensive rebounds and knowing how good they are, it's just great watching them play like that, so it's going to be a tall task for us, for sure.

EMANUEL SHARP: He really hit everything on the head. They're a really big team, they play smart, they have some freshmen, but they play like a veteran team. And there's a reason they're one of the top offensive teams in the country. But it just makes it even more important for us to be locked in on the defensive end, know what we're doing, being connected, knowing the scouting report, and just being clean in our areas.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Emanuel, what is Coach doing to prepare y'all for this game? Playing it in your hometown, what are y'all doing to stay focused?**

EMANUEL SHARP: The same thing we did last weekend. Watch film. They're giving us a great scout. Really locking in on their players, their game plan, how they play, having great energy in shoot-arounds and in practice, and we're keeping the main thing the main thing. I don't think us being in Houston is changing it.

**Q. Emanuel, can you talk about just kind of the success of this program and what it's meant for you to be able to be in the Sweet 16 every year that you've been here?**

EMANUEL SHARP: Yeah, it just speaks to what Coach and the coaching staff have built at the university and the type of program that they have here year-in and year-out. It just shows how important having a culture is. I think it's passed down each team. That's why -- you know, we lose four or five guys every year, but we're able to come back and have a great season year after year. It's because we play the same way each year. The players change, but the culture never changes.

New guys come in, the older guys pass down what they learned from the older guys, and it's just an endless cycle of learning how to play hard, learning how to compete,



MILOS UZAN: They hit it spot on. I think our biggest challenge will be making sure we box out when the shot goes up.

**Q. Since you're all guards, what kind of challenge does Keaton Wagler present to you all?**

EMANUEL SHARP: He's a great player, scores it on almost all three levels, really dynamic, he gets to the basket well, he shoots 40 from three. Just got to be focused. We don't got to do anything special. We got to guard. That's usually how it is game to game. At this point everybody's a good team. Everybody's going to have a few players that you got to sit down and guard, and he just happens to be one of 'em.

**Q. What has Kingston added to this team and how impressed have you been by his maturity as a freshman?**

EMANUEL SHARP: Just amazed. Great player. It's been a joy to watch him since the summer. But, no, he's a great player, really versatile, makes his teammates better. I love that he's just really humble. He's always really genuine on the court. He wants to be better for his teammates, and I appreciate that.

MILOS UZAN: No, I would say since the first day he got here, he's really been a sponge, just really trying to soak up and learn everything just from the players and the coaches. It's been special playing with him. I've always said I feel like he's had eyes in the back of his head, the way he's able to get in the lane and make plays. But, no, he's a great player, though.

**Q. Kingston, what was your mentality just coming in on a team that had so many veterans who have been here and around this program and having to take on such a big role as a freshman?**

KINGSTON FLEMINGS: Watching 'em last year, or even years prior, you know how great of a team they are. So obviously when I came here, I was ready to work, ready to do whatever I could to contribute to the team and to show them what I could do coming into the summer. But each player on this team has a role and obviously we all do our role great, so just knowing that I can rely on these seniors, rely on JoJo and all them like that, and I got players on team that I can rely on them, just we do great job.

**Q. Kingston, following that, Emanuel talked about the culture that has been made here at the University of Houston. You as the newcomer, can you talk about some of the winning habits that you've seen and added to your game and how that applies to playing Illinois**

**this week?**

KINGSTON FLEMINGS: I think consistency. You look at these two, every single game they play they're consistent guarding. They don't make a lot of mistakes. Even when they do, they work hard and overcome 'em. Following after all those guys, seeing them in practice every day, when you have leaders like that who you can follow after, it's easy to go out there and get better every day, so I have great role models for sure.

**Q. Kingston, how are you processing all of this being a freshman? And I'm sure you've grown up watching March Madness, but now being a part of it, I mean, how are you processing all of this?**

KINGSTON FLEMINGS: Yeah, it's great, for sure. As a kid, you definitely dream about playing in these moments, but now I'm here, you know. I'm excited to play every single game. At the end of the day, we're in the Sweet 16, but we're on hardwood, 40 minutes, and it's basketball at the end of the day. You've played this your whole life, so you're playing against a great team, you're playing with your boys, and just try to work as hard as you can to keep on surviving and advance, and that's what we're going to do.

**Q. Emanuel, playing in the post-season, some of these bigger arenas, does anything change with your shot depth perception? Is it a little bit harder to get the read or is it just kind of playing like normal arena?**

EMANUEL SHARP: I mean, yeah, the depth perception changes gym to gym, but all it takes is a shoot-around to get used to it. At the end of the day, it's a 10-foot hoop on a slab of wood. Just do shoot-around, get used to the baskets, get shots up. It doesn't take too long to get used to the gyms.

**Q. Emanuel, Milos, what's the biggest difference between last year's group and this year's group?**

MILOS UZAN: Last year's group was a lot older, had a lot more experience. I kind of feel like last year's group, it was -- everybody was there, so it kind of wasn't really anyone learning anything new. I was really the only new guy learning the culture and the defense and offense. I feel like this year it's a completely different team, honestly. The culture's the same, but our style of play, our defense, it's the same, but it's just I think this year we're trying to run more. We got Kingston who can push, who plays better at a faster pace, and with me and E, I think all of our guards, Mercy, like to run the floor. So I think this year's team --

I don't know, are we faster?

EMANUEL SHARP: I think our pace is probably the same. It feels faster.

MILOS UZAN: It feels faster this year. No, I mean, shoot, last year we had dogs, this year we got dogs, so it's the same. It feels the same a little bit.

EMANUEL SHARP: Yeah, pretty much same thing. Like he said, we're a lot younger this team. We got a lot of guys this is their first year of basketball. So I guess it was -- kind of took longer to reach what we wanted to reach this year, but I feel like at the end of the year, all of our teams always look pretty similar, play the same style of basketball, hard-nosed, play defense, play super hard, crash the boards.

But I think we play -- probably play a little faster. We like to get out in transition a little bit more because that's just how this team operates. But more or less we pretty much very similar to last year.

**Q. Emanuel, same question that was just asked to Kingston but this is your fifth Sweet 16, you're not new to this, you're very true to this, so how refreshing and new is it to you still, I know the standard is still the same, but is it still refreshing to be here?**

EMANUEL SHARP: Yeah, I mean, every time I've gotten here it's felt like, not completely new, but, I don't know, it's very -- I take every year very seriously. It's a blessing to be here because we could easily not have gotten here. So I just try not to take it for granted and just take in the moment, especially this is my last time being here, just cherishing every moment I have with my guys and look forward each time to another chance to play another game with these guys.

**Q. Any of you guys can answer this, but what are you or what is one word that would you describe this team as?**

MILOS UZAN: One word to describe this team? I would just say competitive. I think every day in practice even on the floor at games every shoot around it's just super competitive. I think that's just how we continue to get better. Keep competing with each other.

EMANUEL SHARP: I would probably say versatile. Just because we have a lot of different looks we can give a team, a lot of great players on this team, and each night it could be somebody's night. I think that's what makes us a tough team to play against.

KINGSTON FLEMINGS: One word? I don't know. I can't

think of one word. I don't know. I'm drawing a blank. I can't think of one word to describe the team. It's like what they said, we're all young, we're all here to get better every single day, and we're excited. Every single game we're all watching together. But I don't got one word for you, I'm sorry, my fault.

**Q. For all three of you guys, everyone knows the starting five, and the starting five earned the right to be the starting five, but how impactful has it been to have guys like Mercy Miller and Chase McCarty to name a few to come off and put in maximum effort, where it may or may not show in the stat line, how impactful has that been in competitive games?**

EMANUEL SHARP: It's been huge for us. I think it's just a testament to their attitudes and how they go about the game. It's not like they started off the season like that. They had to trust the process. They still showed up to practice every day. Because every day you're competing. You're competing for, you know, time to get on the floor and he stayed down, Chase and Mercy, they came every day with great attitudes. But they do so much for us off the bench. Chase gives us that contagious energy. I know Coach says all the time, Mercy comes in fearless, ready to go. I think it just gives us that edge. I feel like to be a good team you got to have good players coming off the bench and I think they give us that great spark.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

(Pause.)

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

KELVIN SAMPSON: Really proud of this group. Every team here has a unique journey with their kids starting in June. You go through a lot of adversity. The blessing for our coaching staff is we have great kids, so we don't deal with discipline issues or things like that. And that's intentional. But the balance between our young guys and our veteran guys was, has been great. Because we don't really have guys with big egos. They just understand why they're here. There's been a culture that's been set here over the years, and our returning guys do an awesome job of holding guys accountable to doing the right things that's made us consistent across the board in just about every area with this program. So really proud of this group.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

**Q. A lot of your leaders have been veterans over the years. What is it about Kingston that's allowed you to trust him as a young guy?**



KELVIN SAMPSON: When you're a freshman coming into a program that he's had our sustained level of success over many, many years, you better come in with the right attitude, and the right common sense. And Kingston's been blessed with both. He knew how to defer, he knew how to be respectful, until he got on the court. And when you're on the court he wasn't very respectful. He's the best player from day one. That's not an opinion, that's a fact. So he established himself, but then he would go back to being respectful. No ego. His father is a giver he's a fireman. His mother's a giver, she's a nurse. All his siblings, he has one brother and three sisters, they're all fantastic kids. His sister was just named the Texas High School Player of the Year, she signed a national letter of intent with Duke, early signing period. His other sisters will probably do the same thing. It's a family that is defined by their ambition. And those high achievers are the ones that we, I've always been drawn to.

So Emanuel's the last of the COVID kids. Emanuel's class was recruited by Zoom calls. Kingston and Chris, Isiah, that class is the way it is today. But putting 'em all together they have to be givers in this program. We don't do a lot with scrapbooks or egos or anything like that. But I think our staff does an awesome job of identifying kids that will succeed in this program and this culture.

**Q. We're in Houston, Toyota Center the heart of Houston, how much impact do you think the fans will have on this game?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: It's hard to say. In this same game last year we were in Indianapolis, 60 whatever miles it was from Purdue's campus. They had 20,000 Purdue fans. Then the next game we played Tennessee. They had 20,000 Tennessee fans. So hard to say. I do know that having coached in the Big Ten for two years that the Big Ten travels well. I would expect there to be a lot of Illinois fans here. They have a tremendous program, terrific fan base, but so does Nebraska. We just witnessed that in Oklahoma City. I mean they took that place over. And then Iowa. Iowa has great fan base. So it will be interesting. I think Houston got four great basketball programs, four great fan bases.

**Q. This might be an obvious question but from your point of view what challenges does Keaton Wagler present y'all?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, his size, positional size I think is terrific. Coaching in the Big-12, I mean everybody's got pros. Some teams multiple. A.J. Dybantsa is pretty good, Darryn Peterson, pretty good. Brayden Burries, Bradley, Koa, Krivas, up and down. So everybody's got good

players. If you play in a Power 4 Conference you're not going to get overwhelmed by somebody's overall talent, because you -- I mean, Illinois's not going to look at us and raise their eyebrows, because they're in a league with Michigan. We're in a league with Arizona. We're all used to playing really good teams.

But Wagler in particular his positional size. We like to come certain areas of the floor with traps. He'll present a challenge because he can see over it. A six-foot point guard versus a 6'6" point guard is the difference is being able to see beyond. There's some guys look, but they can't see. A 6'6" point guard not only can look, but he can see. And this kid has great basketball IQ, so he'll present a problem there.

**Q. Joe Espada was telling us yesterday how excited he is about tomorrow and Houston sports about having their opening day and then coming to cheer for you. He also shared with us that he sees you as somewhat of a mentor that you guys have texted each other, he's gone to your coach's show. Can you elaborate a little bit about that relationship and what it means to you that a guy who is managing in the majors looks up to you and wants to learn from you?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: You know, it's interesting you mentioned Joe, because -- let me get my dates right. What is today? Wednesday, right?

**Q. Yes.**

KELVIN SAMPSON: So Dusty, we're good friends. We text each other. He follows our basketball program. He was at a, he sent me a picture of, he's been telling Willie Mays about us. So sent a picture, he took a picture with Willie Mays and sent it to me. And as soon as I got the picture I said, God, I wish my father was alive so I could show him that picture of Dusty and Willie Mays. Because Willie Mays was his favorite player. Mine was Henry Aaron. And that led me back to my relationship with Dusty, because when Henry Aaron was patrolling right field for the Atlanta Braves, Dusty was the left fielder for them.

So when he came here as a manager, we knew who each other was, but we didn't have a relationship. We developed a relationship when he got here. He had this special bottle of wine made for me with Henry Aaron's jersey and his number and all that and he said, Don't you crack that wine until you win a National Championship. So I still got that bottle of wine.

And then I think it was last season during spring training with Joe, they were down, what training, what city do they train in? West Palm Beach? How far is that from Orlando?



Yeah, so we were down playing Central Florida, and he texted me and asked me could he come to the game, and could he come by early and speak to me. And I said, well, that would be hard to do because of our routine before the game and what time we get to the arena. But we just started texting each other then. And then during the season it just started developing. He watched our games -- and I'm a big baseball fan. I mean, I love baseball. So he would run stuff by me, nothing major, major, but he was a first-time manager. And I'm an old guy, seen a lot. Haven't done a lot, but seen a lot. But I'm also a giver too. I like probably more than anything else I just like helping people and when someone asked me if I can do something for them I'll move heaven and earth to help you.

**Q. Kellen was talking about how Milos shows up in some of the big games. How much does the experience of him playing in being a point guard of a team that went to a National Championship how much has that helped him with his experience and leadership at this time of year?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, I think Milos, Milos and JoJo and Emanuel, Ramon -- Ramon was a freshman when we played Illinois the last time. I think that was in Pittsburgh. So we have had some veterans. But in the Big-12 championship game last year against Arizona, I think Milos had 25 in that game. Obviously had to hit a lot of big shots to put us in position to win it. And then the game, the Sweet 16 game, this game against Purdue, same thing. Then, whether it was Tennessee or Duke or Florida, he didn't always, you know, making shots doesn't always equate to playing good. You can play poorly and shoot well. Or you can shoot poorly and play great. So I've always made sure our kids understand what's expected of 'em. But Milos has been a joy to work with. He is a tremendous, tremendous young man. I think of all the guys that had to sacrifice this year, he probably had to sacrifice the most. Because he was the returning starting point guard. And then he had to make some sacrifices, he had to make some adjustments. I had to make some sacrifices and adjustments for those two and figure it out. A lot of times you're not going to figure it out in June and July and August or September, October. You start figuring it out in November. Practices kind of raises your curiosity; well, how about this or how about that. You know, the spacing, who is better at this, who is better at that, how can we do this or that.

Then, once the games play, then all of a sudden it gets real clear. You see what their strengths are. But they both had to sacrifice, but maybe none more than Milos. And I think that's going to help him as he goes forward in his career. Milos will play professional basketball a long time.