

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

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

**Illinois Fighting Illini**  
**Coach Brad Underwood**  
**David Mirkovic**  
**Andrej Stojakovic**  
**Keaton Wagler**

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Illinois - 65, Houston - 55

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, my hat's off to Houston and Kelvin, and the season they had. We beat a great basketball team, a team I've got so much respect for and a coach I've got tremendous respect for. I thought our defense was outstanding both halves. I thought we set a really good precedent early, contesting shots, not giving up paint twos. I thought that was huge. I thought that we made shots hard for them, which we had to do. We didn't make shots. We got some good looks early.

That first half probably set basketball back a few years in terms of the excitement level and the shooting. But when you play a Kelvin Sampson team, you know that's probably what it's going to be. I felt great about the rebounding, something we do exceptionally well. I thought that got us a few easy baskets. They got a couple easy baskets because of their offensive rebounding.

But start of the second half, I thought we found a nice rhythm. Dre was great in the first half, getting downhill, getting to the rim. And then I thought in the second half it just kind of became a little bit of everybody, our cutting, they were blitzing Keaton, getting the ball out of his hands, and then we found cutters and shooters and found a nice little rhythm there.



But other than the free throw shooting, and we're fifth in the country in free throw shooting, it made it a little more interesting than I thought it needed to be, but excited to be moving on and that's what we came here to try to do and very fortunate we beat a great team tonight and get to move on.

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

**Q. Much was made about this matchup and the game being played here in Houston. Your thoughts about Illini Nation and how the fans supported you tonight?**

KEATON WAGLER: We weren't worried about the fans. We've played in tough environments before on the road many, many times. Shout out to our fans for coming in and being loud. I think they were really loud. I heard our fans more than their fans. Yeah, shout out to them.

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, we weren't worried about how close their campus or if we're playing in their city. We knew they were going to show up like they have been all year long. That was least of our worries, to be honest. We were just focusing on coming out here and executing a good game plan.

DAVID MIRKOVIC: The whole season wherever we go they were coming with us to support us, and I'm really thankful for that. And I just want to say thank you for that support. And, like, at the beginning of the game Houston fans were a little louder, but as game was going, they started being louder in their city. So it's just really important for us, I would say just like a wind to our back. Like, they pushed us and thanks for them.

**Q. Keaton, in the first half, it was tight. You guys weren't really hitting shots from three. 27 percent. The second half really opened up. You guys shot 50 percent from three in the second half. What do you think contributed to that the most?**

KEATON WAGLER: I think it was us staying the course. We knew they were going to trap every ball screen, hard hedge, just getting the ball out of our hands, making the right play. We just kept doing that. We kept getting open shots and started to knock 'em down. I think that's what it

was. Everyone being unselfish, not going one-on-one, just playing team basketball.

**Q. They didn't do a ton of driving early in the game. Did you feel like you-all's length really bothered them and did you all see that as an advantage?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, for us we're heavy in being in our gaps. We've been heavy these past couple weeks of having our hands out. I think that kind of like -- them seeing that, it kind of makes 'em a little bit, like, less wanting to drive the basketball. So when we do that every possession from start of the game to the end, it puts a lot of pressure on them not wanting to drive the ball and making them play through our length.

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, we have used our size and length to our advantage all year long, and I think that was one of those games where when you have a team with good shooters and good inside presence as well, you kind of have to use all your tools to win the game. Our presence down there really affected their want to drive throughout the game. I thought the perimeter guys did a great job of keeping their guys in front and limiting that.

**Q. Kylan Boswell missed three straight free throws, stepped away from the line, walked back to half court, and you guys followed him. Was that him just kind of getting back in his own state of mind or did you guys help him through that in that moment?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Obviously, when you're in a certain situation, when you're in foul trouble, it's hard to regain focus on the offensive side. Kylan's a crucial member of this team, both offensively and defensively, so we just tried to get his back. And we see how hard he work. He shoots hundreds of free throws a week. So him staying focused and staying in rhythm to shoot those free throws like he normally does and we have full faith in him knocking the next one down and he has the same faith in us.

KEATON WAGLER: He said it really well. When I missed my free throws, he came up to me and was, like, Move on. Like, you're going to make the next one. That's what I told him when he was walking back, We know how good of a free throw shooter you are. He's probably one of the best free throw shooters on our team, and so we have a lot of faith in him getting to the line late in the game to knock 'em down.

**Q. In a that second half, you went on the 20-2 run to blow the game open. Walk us through that mindset there.**

KEATON WAGLER: What was going well was we were getting stops and we were eliminating them to one shot, and to tough shots as well. Making them shoot tough middies or contested at the rim, 3-pointers, all of that, and then we were going in and grabbing the rebound and offensively we were getting the shots that we wanted, we were knocking 'em down, and if we didn't, then we were getting on the offensive glass and scoring that way.

**Q. Against Penn you had a big run, up by 26 in the second half, 24-9 against VCU, and then a 20-4 run tonight. What allows you to go on these big sudden runs to create that separation?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, I think it's definitely our defense. When we're getting stops and limiting them to one shot, we can push the ball in transition and score that way, or we can get into our actions, find who we want to attack, do it that way. And then just get the shots that we want and stay on the offensive glass. That's definitely the biggest key for us is offensive rebounding. When we offensive rebound and we get second, third shots, we're usually going to score.

**Q. Every time Houston seemed to make a run in the second half you guys neutralized it very well. You hit timely shots. Talk about the composure that runs throughout the team and what the messages are when other teams start to make a run.**

DAVID MIRKOVIC: Yeah, so I would say our probably biggest growth since last game was keeping the lead and staying mentally focused for the course of 40 minutes of the game, and I can see that we had a lead 34 minutes, and they had a lead for one minute. So I would say I'm really proud of us because, like, we were thinking about that, we were working on that, and we were mentally locked in for 40 minutes and that's why we did this good.

**Q. Keaton, can you share some thoughts on -- you are an All-American for scoring. That's really what people know you for. You come out tonight, you get a double double and get 12 rebounds. Can you share some thoughts on being more than just a scorer and what you did tonight against a team that plays incredibly physical?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, for me, I just try to come in here and do what my teammates need me to do to win the game. If that's score the ball, then score the ball. If that's getting the ball out of my hands, like it was tonight, to get my teammates to make plays, I'll do that. Coaches were telling us before the game, it's going to be a guard game to get rebounds. We need 10-plus out of the guards. So I took that challenge on. I went in there, tried to play as

tough as I could, not let them get any second-chance rebounds. So I went in there and tried to get every rebound I could.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

**Q. Houston, they seemed to set the tone a little early in their ball screen coverage. Your thoughts on how your team stayed composed and countered those.**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: They do what they do. There's not going to be, you know, much adjustment. They bring two to the ball pretty quickly in ball screens. It's something we've been very, very good at attacking. Then it was just a matter of reading what they did, whether it was going to be a full rotation to our pops, to our 5 man, or whether they were just going to let those guys make plays. That's where Mirk's really good, and Keaton especially. Keaton's just going to get the ball out of his hands. I thought that especially the start of the second half we were able to exploit that. We started cutting a little bit more than we did in the first half and it was pretty effective.

**Q. Your defense has been built over the years on being comfortable allowing two-point shots. Houston's very comfortable making two-point shots on their offense. They only shoot 40 percent tonight. What was your balance as far as trying to defend their two-point field goal attempts?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, they're a team that gets a lot of dunks. They're a team that is going to shoot a lot of threes. We felt like we could contest those. We didn't want to give them layups and twos, and if they did, it was going to be over a contested hand or what we call a Mozgov. Sharp made one really hard one late, but I thought we did a terrific job of that.

We were really good with Cenac shooting those little baseline jump shots. We were going to give him those. But we wanted to stay pressed up on -- a little closer on the threes, but just contest 'em. I thought our guys did a great job of being in gaps. I thought Jake was elite early on Sharp, used some physicality. Then we didn't want to give Uzan catch-and-shoot threes. He drops dramatically in his percentage off the dribble. Then we knew Kingston was a hard downhill guy. We just had to keep in front, and I thought our big guys did a really nice job in our ball screen coverage tonight.

**Q. Building on that, if you were to take a step back and look at this tournament run and the defensive effort and the defensive performances that you've had, is this something that has been unlocked in the**

**practice, in the preparation? What's led to the good success over these last three wins?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think it's a mental focus. We've been very good at times defensively. It's just sustaining it. I think that Mirk talked about it a little bit. We've got very capable defenders, we've got size and length, and we just got to make shots difficult, and not give the hundred percent shot, the dunks, the layups, to teams. And then I thought we -- I thought one of the keys tonight, and we talked about it ad nauseam, was to win this war we had to win the rebounding battle. We out-rebounded a very good rebounding team by nine.

**Q. Coming into this game, what were your thoughts on Flemings and how did you feel like you were able to slow him down?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, he's an elite mid-range shooter and all of their guys are. That's what they do. I think 60 percent of their twos are mid-range pullup jump shots. We just wanted to see him -- to stay with him -- and especially in a ball screen, to stay with him until he picked it up and gave it up and passed it. We didn't want him to -- we wanted him to see a lot of bodies. And I was upset. It was my fault at half. I jumped in the zone after committing a couple fouls and let him step into a three. Those are the shots he makes, the step-in threes. I thought we did a good job of taking those away.

And then our thing was our pickup point. We wanted our pickup point to be at the three-point line. We didn't want to get too extended. In watching film, I kind of compared him to Ja Morant with his quickness and his speed and his ability to get downhill. We wanted to try to at least level that off and keep him out of the paint.

**Q. It looked like you were nodding your head when we were talking about Keaton and the rebounding. You talked about the rebounding battle. He goes 4-14 shooting, but he was rebounding. You're talking about a freshman, a young kid adjusting to the college game. Can you share thoughts, first, on getting him here, and then the progression he made?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, he's a great listener. We've talked for a week about -- this week about our guys. We knew that Cenac and Tugler, they back tap a lot of balls. They're elite at it. So our bigs were going to have to hit bodies, but our guards were going to have to come clean it up. So we needed a big, big rebounding game from our guards. I thought Keaton just takes everything to heart. He's had some big rebounding games this year, but to do this in this moment -- you guys got to understand what a joy it is to coach him, and he doesn't worry about needing

to score points.

I thought his job defensively was equally as good, but his job on the glass, offense finds him, and he's going to score some points, yes, but he's always going to make the right play and he's going to do whatever it takes to win. Tonight it was defend and rebound at a really high level and he did that.

**Q. Second Elite Eight appearance in the last three years. What does it mean for not only you, but the program and just the standard that you have established here at Illinois?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think it starts every year with the mindset we're trying to win a National Championship. To me, that's what this thing is about is having the opportunity to pursue that. We've got an incredible university with incredible facilities, incredible fan base. You know, the cliché coaches win games, administrators win championships is probably true. Got great administrative support.

And as long as we can keep knocking on the door, I really believe that Illinois is a special place and it's a special job and all those things are real possibilities. We've just got to keep advancing, keep working.

**Q. It seemed like we saw a lot of showing on ball screens, disrupting the ball handler. Saw a little bit in the VCU game, a lot more tonight. What's been the evolution of that part of the defense compared to --**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Our opponents. Our opponents. We have seen some elite guards. Those three tonight, the guards at VCU, the way they play, the style of play, it was very important to want to force them to give it up tonight. If you just let them get downhill and attack you, we felt like that they could put some fouls on our bigs. It created then lob opportunities. They made a nice change at half, started cutting Cenac and had Tugler right there in the pocket a few times.

But against great offensive guards, you're not going to solve every problem, and tonight, unfortunately, our defense was good and we took the three away from 'em, for the most part. They hit a couple late. But when the game really mattered, it was really good defense that started with our bigs doing a great job in ball screen coverage.

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