

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

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

Houston Cougars
Coach Kelvin Sampson
Emanuel Sharp
Milos Uzan

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.

KELVIN SAMPSON: First of all, congratulations to Coach Underwood and his team. They have a good team. So does Houston. Both those teams were worthy of winning this game. But I thought the first half I just -- you know, it was just so uncharacteristic for us to miss so many of our open looks. Usually when we do that, we do a pretty good job of getting the offensive rebounds.

But I thought they -- both teams, I mean, we had 22 points. They had 24. So I thought both teams guarded the other team. You can tell we had a week to prepare for each other. We knew what they were going to do, and they knew what we were going to do. But they got some good looks and missed and we got some really good looks too and missed. Sometimes making shots can be contagious. Sometimes missing shots can be contagious too.

But proud of the way my team fought. Really disappointed that we lost this game. We felt like we could win this game. But give Illinois a lot of credit. They have a good team.

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

Q. They went on that big run kind of early in the second half. How did that affect the game and just sort of change the flow of the game in that moment?

EMANUEL SHARP: I just feel like we really needed to come out in the second half good, get some buckets, get some stops. I think we got some breakdowns in our pick-and-roll coverage, and I mean, that's kind of -- our whole defense is based on a good pick-and-roll coverage, so when we don't get our coverage calls right, our defense kind of breaks down. So I think we had a couple of those and they capitalized on each one. I think that really hurt us to start the second half.

Q. Can you share some thoughts on just the physicality of the game. Their freshmen had 12 rebounds. Underwood talked about how important the rebounding battle was and just the physicality that they played with and just maybe what in particular you saw from Wagler, the All-American.

EMANUEL SHARP: Yeah, I mean, they won the rebound battle. I don't know, they attacked the basket and when our bigs came to help, that left us on the weak side having to block out some of their bigs. When players drive and it drags two to the basket on a contest, we're outnumbered on the back end. I think we just didn't grab enough. We didn't defensive rebound well enough. Wagler had 12 rebounds. That's crazy. Yeah, we needed to do better on the boards.

MILOS UZAN: Yeah, that's what hurt us, defensive rebounding from the guards. I mean, yeah.

Q. Kingston was noticeably distraught directly after the game. As players who have been in the program for a while, have been through things like this, what are things that you tell him as he goes through this?

EMANUEL SHARP: Not to be too hard on yourself. I feel like a lot of those guys immediately after the game they start putting the blame on themselves. But it's a team game. We all could have played better. But I just try to comfort them. I know how much he cared about this program and about the guys and about the bonds that he had on this team. This team was real close and he appreciated that. That's one thing I notice about Kingston is that he's real genuine in everything he does. So I know that this hits him hard because this is the last time this team gets to be a team. It sucks. I mean, it sucks,

knowing how good we were. We just had a bad night and it's unfortunate.

Q. A lot of Sweet 16 appearances, trip to the Final Four. You've done it all with one program for one coach. This is the immediate aftermath, but how are you going to remember your NCAA tournament experiences?

EMANUEL SHARP: You know, just how much it meant to this program. Not even just the tournament, but every game. The coaching staff and Coach, they approach every single game like it's the last game of the season, and I really appreciated that. Every single play means a lot to this program. I learned so much from that. Every program doesn't do that. Teams take plays off games off. They take games lightly.

But this program practices too. Every practice is like the last practice that we're going to have. Every game is like the last game we're going to have. I'm going to take that wherever I go after this, having that mindset, having the respect for the game to just give everything I have in each game. And I learned that from Coach Sampson and the rest of the coaching staff, and it's really valuable to me that he's put that on generations of players. Not just this team, but every single team he's had, he's coached 'em the exact same way. It just shows how great he is and how great the coaching staff is. I just wish we could have played better for him.

MILOS UZAN: He hit it spot on.

Q. What do you take from this ongoing journey, the things that you've learned here at Houston, such a strong culture here? What changed for you that will carry on for the rest of your life through these experiences?

MILOS UZAN: It's been a blessing being here my past two years just playing for Coach Sampson, and I think I just take every day, just having right attitude, giving the right effort. That's something that I think I'll take for the rest of my life. I'm just so grateful for Coach Sampson and for E and just for this team, and shoot, Coach Q who isn't here. This is a special program and I'm just so grateful to be a part of it.

Q. You showed up here five years ago with a severe leg injury coming out of high school. Can you speak a little bit about your personal growth here and how far you've come since then? Because a lot of people wondered what your college career would be like when you first got here.

EMANUEL SHARP: I mean, yeah, I still remember the first day I came downstairs and my dad was on the phone with Coach Samp, and since then he just had the ultimate belief in me. When I got hurt, they doubled down on how big they were on me. As soon as I got here, they got me right back to my -- even better than my original self. I just listened to Coach Samp and just tried to follow everything he told me to a T and work my way up through the program.

Like I said earlier, I just learned so much from being here that I'm going to use for the rest of my life and I never took that for granted. Each year it's just been about growing, about connecting with my new teammates, building bonds every year. And then this year it's just been a blessing, especially with the younger guys. I had to step into a new leadership role with them, and it's been so fun being able to come every day and be with those guys and then try to lead 'em as best as I could.

Kingston, Chris, Bryce, Isiah, I love coming in every day and getting them through practice. As much as Coach gets on their ass, you know, I'm always there for them, just telling 'em that he's doing this because he loves y'all. He's trying to make y'all better. I know what it's like to be there because I was there at one point, thinking that he's just getting on me just to get on me, but it's for a reason. I just try to do the same things Jamal did for me. I love everybody that's been through here. I love Coach. I love him hard.

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

Q. Throughout this game, Emanuel's leadership was so visible, even just the communication that you had with him throughout timeouts, in between plays. What does it mean to have a player like that that you can have trust in him?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well Emanuel's a very mature kid. He had some great role models that helped him along the way, all the way back to Marcus, and we were playing Northern Kentucky -- I can't remember what year it was. It might have been 2023. Was that Emanuel's freshman year?

But we were really struggling, and we decided to throw the ball inside to J'Wan and have him just face and turn and throw it to the other side of the floor to Emanuel, and he hit two big threes to just kind of open it up. But since then, he's just been someone you could depend on. You get so close to these kids. You don't know 'em at all when you get on the phone with 'em. You just know their name, and you start building a relationship with the first phone call,

and then it ends tonight, and they move on with their life, and somewhere along the way you hope that you made a difference for 'em.

But that's why you choose coaching. When I chose coaching, I didn't -- my dad was a high school coach, so I didn't know anybody that coached in college. My goal was to be a high school coach because I thought that's what I was meant to do, because my dad was a high school coach, and I know the impact he had on those kids' lives, and I thought that was something that really appealed to me.

But after all these years, that's something that still matters. Winning the games is why we do it, right? We want to compete at the highest level and be competitive. But, you know, people will forget who won games or what your records were. That will be forgotten. But being able to coach kids like Milos and Emanuel and be able to stay a part of their lives, you know, five, ten years from now -- of course, they got a lot longer than I do, but however long that is, you just hope that you get to see 'em.

They will eventually get married and have kids and you get to share that with 'em. But relationships is why you do it. We would all like to win. We really did think we could win this game tonight. But when two good teams play each other, one team's going to win, one team's going to lose. That's what this tournament's about. We've had a lot of success in this tournament, but tonight just wasn't our night.

But credit Illinois. Good for them. I'm disappointed in my kids, but Illinois kids deserved to win that game.

Q. The rebounding battle was big. Coach Underwood talked about that being a difference. You had Keaton with 12 rebounds, known a lot for his scoring, but yet a big rebounding night as well. Can you share a little bit on his impact as a young guy in this game tonight?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, his frame is -- doesn't scream 12 rebounds, but his toughness does. I think Brad and that staff has done a good job with him. I didn't see Keaton play in the Summers. I saw most of the kids, but we don't recruit a lot of kids from the Midwest, at least upper Midwest. But I think he did a good job choosing the right program. They have helped him, and that's a credit to Brad and his staff.

Maybe he was a good rebounder before he got there. But I know that the two best rebounding teams we played against this year has been Arizona and Illinois. Both those teams are really good rebounding teams and you can tell that's a big emphasis of those staffs.

Q. In terms of the free throw difference, two attempts for Houston compared to 18 for Illinois. How do you characterize their defense?

KELVIN SAMPSON: That's a byproduct of shot selection. That wasn't the referees. Somebody, I'm sure, will bring that up. But they were hard to score at the rim. Most of our looks were 15, 17 feet. Those are shots we normally are pretty good at, especially Cenac. Cenac's not a good three-point shooter, but he's really good medium-range shooter, which is most of the shots he had tonight. He normally makes those. Tonight just wasn't his night. When you're shooting medium-range jump shots or you're shooting threes, you're not going to get fouled.

A lot of their free throws came after -- when we started fouling too. So that's let's understand we were trying to foul 'em there for how many minutes. So a lot of those -- I thought both teams played good defense for a long time. We had a couple breakdowns, coverage calls. But making shots is a -- it's like gasoline in a lawn mower. A lawn mower needs gas. You don't fill it up -- if you don't keep gas in it, it's not going to run. As much as you tell your kids, Don't allow your missed shots to affect your effort on defense, these kids are human beings, man. They're not necessarily upset, but they're disappointed their shot's not going in, and somehow that thought process will affect your focus and where it should be when you're on defense.

Maybe that had something to do with it. But I was proud of our kids' effort. We just didn't play good enough. Holding that team to 65 was probably good enough, but you got to score 66.

Q. What do you think of Kingston's season and the impact he was able to make as a freshman here?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Kingston coming in was a really talented player, but I'm not sure he knew how to impact winning the right way. But he was a tremendous kid. You know, the thing that impressed me most about Kingston all year long is he never missed practice, never missed an individual workout. Now, he sprained his ankle a couple times, so he might have missed some workouts due to his ankle. But where a kid -- another kid might have been out one or two more days, Kingston always came back early. He took his craft seriously. He and Chris both. But from June through our last workout in August, and then they went on a little break, to September, October, and then November, he just got better and better and better and better. He didn't know how to play winning basketball when he got here. He just knew how to be the best player when the ball was in his hands. He learned a lot. But I give a lot of credit for that to Milos and Ramon and

Emanuel. Kingston allowed them to help him too. He was very humble and deferred and no ego, focused on the right things and you have to give a lot of credit to his mother and father too. But Kingston is going to have a great career for a long time, just as the Wagler kid. They will both impact winning at the NBA for a long time. God willing, they both stay healthy, they will both have great careers.

Q. You've been a part of so many games with your resume, how do you turn the page from a game like this from your experience?

KELVIN SAMPSON: It will be tough. I've never not been just in complete awe of the finality of a season. Because you're driven for -- you know, last season ended for us on April 7. And then the next day we drove from San Antonio back to Houston, and I really haven't stopped since then. You just keep going. Everything is driven by the season you're in. At some point here in the next day or two I'm going to have to have individual meetings with the players, find out what their plans are, who is coming back, who is not. That's what you have to do now. Then you have to start building a roster. Then you're consumed with portal, NIL. That will mandate just about everything that you're doing. I always get a kick out of people that say, well, now you can take some time off. I will eventually. Not right now. But right now helping Emanuel, Milos, Ramon, Kalifa, Kingston, making sure those guys are settled. Making sure they're organized on what their next step is. Helping them, helping the other kids. I mean, I've said this a lot over my career, I don't have to be their life, but they are my life. When you choose this profession, it's not certain days. I've been blessed with a great family, a great wife. She understands that as long as I'm coaching, she knows what I'm going to be doing every day. I don't have a lot of hobbies. I don't take vacations. We do take a family vacation. We have a place that we like to go to. But while we're there, we're recruiting. That's where I was when Milos called me and told me he was coming back. That's where I was when Marcus Sasser called me and told me he was coming back. That's where I was when I was recruiting this kid or that kid. So, you know, this is what I do. But if you want to be really good at this, you have to be, you have to be in. I'm proud of our program. Disappointed for our fans. I never felt like we needed to be here to win because of how much success we've had in somebody else's gym. But Illinois had a great year. They play in a great conference. They were 8-2 on the road. So we knew that this was going to be a difficult game. But we he felt like we could win the game. But sometimes you got to play good enough and they did and we didn't. They move on, and I'm sitting up here at 1 o'clock in the morning trying to figure out when I can get up and get out of here.

Q. I want to follow-up on what you just said, what

keeps you going, in this NIL world, when so many of your colleagues have decided they don't want to do it any more.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I still like it, but we all have our time. But I think coaches have to understand when their time is. We all know this is a young man's game. I still like it, but we're all going to step away eventually. I haven't really thought about that to the point where I can share anything. But I'm not going to get in anybody's way though. If I'm in somebody's way, or if I'm overstaying my welcome, I'll be the first one to leave.

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