

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

Friday, March 27, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

**Illinois Fighting Illini**  
**Coach Brad Underwood**  
**Kylan Boswell**  
**Andrej Stojakovic**  
**Keaton Wagler**

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, we're obviously very excited to be here. It's a tribute to these guys and their competitive spirit and work through out the course of a very long season. It's exciting to see the success of the Big Ten. Obviously we've got three teams still playing and we get to play one of 'em.

I thought that the league was as good as it's ever been top to bottom, and that's being played out. Got a great opponent tomorrow, one that's obviously playing well, will be the 1 seed in getting here, and a higher seed. I think they're much better than their seed. Well-coached, great point guard, and a team that's gotten better since the first time we played them.

So tremendous amount of respect for Bennett and what he's done, and then a team that has continued to just play great throughout the tournament. So we know when you get to this point, you're going to play a high major team or a team that's played very, very good basketball. You got to play well to win, and we've got to continue to -- ourselves to build on what we did last night and take that to another level.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. You guys beat Iowa by six back in January. What can you take away from that game that you want to improve upon when you play them the second time?**



KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, I think we did a great job throughout the course of the game defensively and running our offense. I think what's helped us tremendously throughout this run so far in March is sticking to our process, getting the type of shots we want, and then guarding the way we've been doing. I think if we just continue to stay on that path, we'll be all right.

KEATON WAGLER: He said it well. I think Iowa's a team that's not going to go away. When we played 'em, we got up early on them, and then we let them back in the game. We can't get lackadaisical on that side of the ball on defense, just stick to our process throughout the whole game.

**Q. Keaton, we talked about your rebounding performance last night and you got some really good rebounding forwards on this team. As a guard, does your approach to how you get your rebounds have to be different or can you kind of look at some of your teammates in the front court and use the same tactics that they do?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, for a guard, it's definitely different. Bigs, it's more of a physical battle for them. As for guards, it's tracking down the ball, getting the longer rebounds. That's what it was yesterday for me. Our bigs did a great job blocking out their bigs, and I just came in there and cleaned up the boards that way.

**Q. Is there a behind-the-scenes moment that you're willing to share that has kind of encapsulates the bond that this team has?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, just the amount of time we spend with each other in the meal room, in the locker room, before and after, I mean, there's nothing like it. Just the laughs we share on the bus, whether it's something we see on our phones that's funny. But we're very comfortable with each other and that's what's translated our success.

**Q. Coming off the bench, when you come in, you've provided a spark in numerous games here. How do you know what you need to do when you come in? Is it when the offense is stalling or going well? I mean,**



## how does that work out for you?

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, everyone on the bench has full faith in the starters coming out with great energy, and when we sub in for them, they expect the same from us and to play equally as hard. So that's all we ask from each other. I think that's what has given us success off the bench. We just come match their energy and maintain it throughout the game.

**Q. You mentioned after the Houston game that no lead is safe in March. What do you feel prepared you guys the most for that Big Ten slate that you guys played this season?**

KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, had a couple games throughout the season we got up early and let teams come back. I think having those games under our belt and playing in the best conference all year, we had a lot of huge games, a lot of pressure moments. So we just rely on ourselves and everything we've done all year when those moments get tough like that to maintain and continue to win the game.

**Q. I'm sure you guys saw all the photos and videos of the students on campus climbing the statute and mobbing Green Street. What was your initial reaction to that, especially in all that rain?**

KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, our fans are crazy, but we love it. It's exciting. It's a reflection of the success that we've had in March and hopefully we can continue to keep it going and crazy things can still happen on campus.

**Q. Keaton, yesterday the first half was a little bit of a struggle, but you came out in the second half rebounding and scoring. As the season has progressed in your freshman year, how have you learned to process information early in games that you can use throughout the course of the game as it goes along?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, just reading the defense, seeing what they're doing. Houston, they were trapping, hard hedging, every ball screen. So just getting the ball out of my hands quickly, making them play in rotation, and just trusting my teammates to go out there and make the right play, and that's what was happening.

When we went on our run, it was me just getting the ball out of my hands and us making quick decisions, getting wide-open shots, and we started to knock 'em down. And then if we weren't, then we were getting on the offensive glass.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the

student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

**Q. Defensively you guys have really turned it up a notch here in the NCAA tournament. What do you attribute that to?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I wish I had the answer. I would write the book. I think that there's a tremendous focus. I think there's a maturity. I think that Cam has done a very, very nice job of talking scouts, following the detail. We've been very specific about how we want to do some certain things. And then I thought the most -- watching film of last night's game, I thought the most impressive thing was I didn't feel like there was one possession that we were off. I thought we had the mental turned up and there weren't a lot of scouting report mistakes.

So that's been one of the biggest key. We've been very good throughout the season at times. We just haven't been that consistent. So that has to continue if we want to keep moving on.

**Q. When you first started recruiting heavily with the Eastern Europeans, did you envision that they would help you to this kind of success so quickly? And now that it has, do you feel like other coaches are going to follow your lead?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yes and yes. Yeah, I think that our whole intent has been to recruit players that have the ability to lead us to a National Championship-type run. That's the goal every year. It's been a lot of work. It's been just an unbelievable process.

Geoff Alexander, Orlando Antigua deserve most all of the credit in terms of building the relationships in Europe. It's taken years. NIL has obviously helped enhance our abilities to attract some of the best players in Europe. But they're a great fit for us. It's not for everybody. I enjoy coaching 'em. They fit our university. We're a diverse university with a lot of international students, so it's a perfect fit for them.

Basketball-wise it's a great fit for me, and I like coaching them. The way we're playing with positional size and shooting, it's just -- it's a great marriage and a great fit. So we'll continue it. I would think others will continue to migrate over there and keep trying to recruit those guys.

**Q. I'm doing a feature on Coach Antigua. What has he brought to your program? And I know this is his second stint with you. Can you tell me a little bit about that relationship between you two?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, he's the GOAT. And I mean



that. He is as good as there is. He's great for me. I have a tendency to want to coach the glass half empty. I strive for perfection. I want the perfect game. He's got a tremendous way of looking at it as the glass is half full. He's got great humor. He makes me laugh. But he is a tremendous relationship person. He's a great communicator -- he's very good basketball coach. But he is an unbelievable communicator and connector of people, and that's invaluable today.

He walks in a room, he walk in a gym, he knows everybody and he can talk to everybody. You see why he was the lead man for the Globetrotters for many, many years. He's just got a great demeanor and personality, and personally a great friend, but he's great for Brad Underwood, the basketball coach, too.

**Q. You mentioned that you're facing an Iowa team tomorrow that's gotten better. They did struggle in the late half of the conference season and caught fire in the tournament. What specifically are they doing differently, if anything, that you have noticed in preparing for them tomorrow?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think that there's -- it's not one thing. I think their ability to be diverse. They played a shooting lineup a lot yesterday with Cooper and Sage. I think that both those young men are better. They're not freshmen anymore -- not playing like freshmen. They're playing like chiseled veterans. They can play big. I think they're defensively very dialed in, very focused.

It was kind of an unusual first half for me personally watching them yesterday because both teams were elite at shot making. I kind of had a mindset that the halftime score might be the final score. But they're rebounding better, especially on the offensive side.

So I think they have got -- I think they're doing a lot of things very, very well. They played big against Clemson. Obviously, they matched Florida on the glass, which is very impressive. We scrimmaged Florida. We know how challenging that was. So, yeah, they're obviously playing very well.

**Q. Can you share some thoughts on just the Big Ten. What is this showing -- with three teams and then the teams that have won, obviously, what does it say about the league to you? And just what comes to mind when you think about how it represents the league?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. This is year nine for me. I've said, you know, it's, my opinion, the best basketball league out there. We've got tremendous fans. We're a league that the fans are very informed, very intelligent, very

passionate. You go on the road, almost anywhere you go, and you got a sellout crowd. The games are more like events. They're bigger than just kind of a game. They're events. I think that they encompass more than just the community and the campus. They encompass states.

Great, legendary coaches. Coaches that have been there for a long time. I always go back to when I took the job, I sat our staff down and I said, you know, Tom Izzo and Jud Heathcote, there's about 60 years of the same culture, and you go Gene Keady and Matt Painter, and you go Purdue, and Fran had been at Iowa, and you just look down the list and like, okay, how are we going to pass these people?

It's just got established basketball traditions. I think this year compared to last year -- last year you look at our all freshmen team, it was all one-and-dones, and now we've gotten older. Kind of in that same boat that the SEC maybe was last year. Things go in cycles that way.

But top to bottom it's an incredible place to coach basketball. It's a fun place to coach basketball. You get challenged every night, and it just so happens we got a group of players this year top to bottom who are outstanding.

**Q. You've been a head coach for a decade-plus now. Just seeing what Ben McCollum has done in his first year here, what do you think about him as a player and as a coach that's made him so successful this year?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, I think that there's -- you know, the world's changed. When I took over, players had to sit out and the transfer world was different. Now can you bring your culture and you can establish that. I think he's obviously very intelligent. He brought guys with him. It helps when Bennett is one of 'em. So you're able to establish your culture in a very quick way. This is a tribute to him. His teams have always won because they continue to get better. They don't stay status quo.

I followed his teams at Northwest Missouri. I knew his point guard there when I was in Manhattan. He was from Manhattan and my wife taught him. He just knows how -- he knows how to coach, he knows how to win, and he's established that culture in a very quick amount of time and found a lot of success.

**Q. You've highlighted the IQ and poise from Keaton and also Mirk. At what point during the season did you know that these guys could be elite catalysts for a potential Final Four run?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think that we've banked on that a little bit. We made some changes early. We were a

little different team. We call 'em action guys, and we were putting those guys into a lot of action. I think Mirk continued to grow. With Kylan out, with Andre out during that stretch, we didn't have a lot of ball handling. He became that. He became a backup point guard-type for us. As we've stayed very big, he's guarded every position on the court.

But their ability to make decisions and make plays for others has always been there. It was just us gaining enough confidence in them to -- and the opportunity to put them in those positions, so they have really flourish under those -- under that kind of mindset that they can go do those things.

**Q. I wanted to ask about the history of these two teams. They have met since 1908 and this is by far one of the biggest in terms of stage-wise and everything. What is it like for these two teams to meet here, especially considering the number of Big Ten teams that have made it this far in the tournament?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Isn't that great for basketball? I mean, to me, this is what makes basketball great is these unbelievable rivalries -- and I say rivalries, but games where there's so much history dating so far back. You've got two historic programs that have all found success at different levels. This just gets to be another one of those games. I just think these opportunities are fabulous for the game of basketball. They're both great for our programs, they're great for the Big Ten. And it's not often you get two conference opponents playing in an Elite Eight to go to a Final Four, but it's just fabulous for the league and it's fabulous for our programs, and to me it's -- I didn't know it was 1908, but that speaks volumes to basketball at the University of Iowa and University of Illinois.

**Q. Throughout this season, throughout the tournament, Iowa's had a number of different role players step up. How are you preparing defensively with a team that can have a number of different players not named Bennett Stirtz step up and be the difference in ball game?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You think I'm going to tell you that? You really want me to tell you that? You think I'm going to tell you that?

They have got a lot of good players and we've got to be prepared for all of them. I think that's one of the things that you expect when you get to an Elite Eight game is that everybody's going to play well and you have to prepare for that in all facets.

**Q. You talked about Ben McCollum, his path, his**

**journey, everything else. Can you share a bit about yours from McPherson, SFA, here? It has to be a little surreal, but can you share some insight into just your personal journey as a coach and getting here?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, you know, it's something I reflect on. It's something I -- I made mention to it when we were talking about the Houston game. A little town of 13,000 people in McPherson, Kansas, which is an unbelievable little basketball community in Kansas. But 26 years to become a Division I head coach, you know, the junior college ranks, longtime assistant, spent 10 years at Western Illinois University. I've been blessed along the way because I've worked for nothing but winners for head coaches and people who allowed me to grow.

The rock star in this isn't me. It's my wife. You know, living in Macomb, Illinois, for 10 years and, to be honest, not making very much money and raising three kids and literally being gone five days a week while raising a family, then back to the junior college ranks to Daytona Beach. And I say this in a lot of ways, what an incredible job. It was an incredible place to help raise our kids, going to the beach every weekend. And I loved coaching ball in junior college.

But you work for Bob Huggins, you work for Frank Martin, you learn winning. They helped. I played for a legendary coach in Jack Hartman. So it's been maybe a different path than most, but one that I sure wouldn't -- there's not one step of it that I would give up because I've been beyond blessed to work for great people who helped prepare me to get to these moments. Stephen F. Austin was a great starting point and an incredible job with great people. I think that's the one thing, every step of the way I've been fortunate to be around winners and really, really good people.

**Q. Bennett Stirtz is one of the leading scorers in the Big Ten this year. Is there anything specific you've seen from him over the last couple games in this tournament to be able to lead Iowa to the Elite Eight?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think the one thing they're doing is playing him a little more off the ball. He's not playing as much on the ball. They're giving him some maybe some breaks where he's just not on it constantly. He's still No. 1 in the country in ball screen usage and scoring. He's very effective, he's going to have the ball in his hands late clock. But he's an elite shot maker. He can make 'em off the bounce, he can make 'em off the catch. His impact on this basketball team is, it's not understated. He is fabulous, he elevates everybody else.

**Q. You mentioned Europeans earlier, Folgueiras, you**

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**held him 2-9 shooting in your first meeting because he's obviously been on a tear in the tournament. How has he changed maybe your scout for Iowa?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think the one thing that we knew from him going into the portal and evaluating him, he's a very, very capable shooter. He's a guy that can obviously make shots. I think the one thing that he's doing is rebounding at a better clip than he was the first time we played them he's a guy that again gives them tremendous versatility in pick and rolls, pick and pops, he can play in the pocket, he can drive it. So he's playing out standing. You put him with Bennett and they're both very, very effective in all of those actions. So we respect the heck out of him. We know he's on a tear, he hit a game winner, and you got to account for him, for sure.

**Q. Both last night and today giving a lot of credit to Cam. I wonder if your NCAA tournament scout and prep process has changed at all over your nine years at Illinois, have things been altered and does that especially play a role with the familiar opponent like Iowa?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well I've changed a lot. I mean, night and day, to be honest, that's the one thing I haven't done is stay status quo. I think that COVID forced me to think about how to do things different, assistant coach, we didn't go out and recruit. So I had 'em in practice every day. So I first started going to coordinators, defensive guy and an offensive guy back then. I loved it. I thought our attention to detail was much better. It was one voice they were constantly hearing. And then we've just continued to grow that responsibility through analytics and AI and everything else through this process. But it's been really good for us it's been really good for our team, it's been, you know, you see the best example is when you used to alternate coaches and from scout to scout, you might miss something. Now in an offensive coordinator Tyler or Cam said, Well we did this, we saw this against a non-league opponent and they have seen it. Whereas somebody else, if when we rotated might not have had that scout. So things were missed. And I just feel like we're more efficient, we're dialed in better. It's one of the things I've changed. And I continue to try to change and look at new things all the time.

**Q. You came from a Mid Major as well, same thing as Ben McCollum, touching on him again, can you talk about how the difficulty it is to come from a mid major and succeed right away the way he has?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, you know, I think that we -- winners win. And when you know how to win I think that there's tremendous value in that. I think that not

everybody, there's a lot of people who can X and O and do this. I think leadership plays into that. I think it all becomes a little bit, yeah, is it different? The levels are different, the pressures are different. But I think leaders have the ability to lead whomever and wherever. He's proven that. I think that the coaching piece is a big part of that. It's evident, but it's also very encompassing to be able to handle -- and the biggest difference is probably off the court, just the pressure that's happen off the court with recruiting and social media and you all and those things are probably the biggest difference. But he's obviously got elite leadership skills and can coach the game.

**Q. Andrej's emergence as defensive player. You saw him do a fantastic job yesterday against Houston. What's been the key for him changing his mindset?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: He's a very willing learner. He's a very willing listener. And then demanding it. It's one of the things that has been a challenge with our season is he missed seven weeks at the start of the year, in the formative time of practice. He missed all of pre-season. He missed early games. Time that I really wanted to grind on him. I wanted to demand him to be an elite defender and guard the other team's best players and we had to go through some of that on the fly and make winning plays. He did that in the Texas Tech game, he blocks a jump shot. And there's been incredible moments from him. It's the consistency we're starting to see now from him that is really impressive. Very good elite -- scoring's easy for him. It's just doing all the other things that lead to winning and defending and rebounding are things that he's really bought into.

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