

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

Saturday, March 28, 2026

Houston, Texas, USA

Toyota Center

## Illinois Fighting Illini Coach Brad Underwood

Tomislav Ivisic

Andrej Stojakovic

Keaton Wagler

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

Illinois - 71, Iowa - 59

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, it's better than I dreamt it would ever be. 39 years in the business and that's all I'm going to say about my side of this. This is about these guys. My hat's off to Iowa. Great, great run, great season. They're extremely well-coached. They got a great player in Bennett Stirtz. They threw the first punch. They bloodied us. Their physicality was very well-noted.

I thought after the first five minutes, we settled in, even though we missed some shots. And then I thought our physicality and our purpose in the start of the second half was really, really good. Then we kind of do what we've done, just find an offensive spurt or two, and Tommy got a couple of back-to-back post-ups that gave us a more-than-a-one-possession lead, and then we got stops.

They came out blazing. 57 percent the first half, and then I think they made six field goals the second half, and only 1-2. We say it when we protect the logo and don't give up layups. Very pleased with our rebounding. That's one thing I felt like that they were doing at a much better rate than the first time we played them. Again, Mirk has 12 tonight and was dominant on that end.

So just a great Elite Eight game, two really good teams, and we're fortunate that we pulled away late and came



away with a win.

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

**Q. Keaton, can you take me back to your recruiting process, your first impressions of Brad, and the message that he gave you about what you could bring to this program?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, first time I talked to him on my visit, he's just a really cool dude outside of basketball, just normal conversations about anything. Then in basketball, he's super competitive and that's what I like about him. He hates to lose. I hate to lose. So it just combined really well. Just talking to him just throughout the whole recruiting process, I knew that this was the place I wanted to be.

**Q. Tommy, how do you feel like you guys used your size advantage to have success in this game?**

TOMISLAV IVISIC: I think we were dominant on the glass from the first minute, even in the beginning of the game. I would say they started the game better, but rebounding kept us in the game. We scored 40 points in the paint compared to their 12. Yeah, I think that's it.

**Q. Keaton, 12 months ago you're in high school. Fast-forward 12 months and now you're Most Outstanding Player of the regional. What's been your experience over these last nine months?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, just a lot of hard work, really. Just getting in every day, working hard no matter if it's basketball, lifting, eating, all of that. Just staying focused throughout the whole time, building chemistry with my teammates and coaches. Just getting in here, having a lot of fun.

**Q. Could you just put into words what it means to be heading to the Final Four bringing your school back for the first time in more than 20 years?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: I mean it feels great. From the moment we stepped on campus we kind of got a sense of how talented we were, but it feels surreal actually being in



this moment. I wouldn't want it any other way with these guys right next to me. Don't get it wrong, it's not just us three. We got guys 1 through 15 and a roomful of coaching staff, administration, guys that help us every day, managers that don't get the credit, and it took all of us to get here and it took all of us to give a hundred percent of what we got to achieve this.

I think last thing I'll say is I don't want anybody to think that this is it. Like, we're not -- we didn't get to the Final Four just to get there. We're coming to win two more games and we'll take it one game at a time so, yeah.

**Q. Tommy, you fouled out with a couple minutes left. What was your experience like watching that from the bench over the last couple minutes?**

TOMISLAV IVISIC: Very frustrated. I fouled out and I think it wasn't a foul.

Can I talk about it?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, you go ahead, do whatever you want right now.

TOMISLAV IVISIC: I don't think it was a -- I was very excited that we were up and that my team did good, but I was very frustrated I was on the bench. I was thinking a lot of things, but, yeah, we finished the game very good, we won it, and yeah.

**Q. Keaton, could you answer the question about what it means to get to the Final Four?**

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, it means a lot. This is what kids dream of. I know I dreamed of this when I was growing up, playing in the Final Four, competing for a National Championship. To be able to do it with the people around me, you know, teammates, coaches, fans, managers, everyone, it means a lot. Like he said, like, we got here, but we're not done yet.

**Q. Andre, I wanted to follow-up on what you mentioned about when everybody got to campus. This is a group that's come from all over the place. Some players have been here for a while. You just showed up. What allowed this group to be able to jell so quickly so that you realized when everybody started playing together how talented you could be when not everybody had spent a lot of years together? What helped this group jell together?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: How close we are off the court is I think really what separates us apart. We all live in the same building. We see each other constantly. The

amount of time we spend in the gym, even when we're not playing basketball, in the lounge, in the team room, eating breakfast every single day with each other, cracking jokes, it's ultimately what translates our chemistry on the court. I think that's what's so special about this group.

**Q. You have come off the bench since made February. What have you learned about the difference in mindset starting versus coming off the bench and being so effective down the stretch here?**

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Yeah, learning about what it takes to win a game, the stuff that doesn't show up in the stat sheet, knowing that the guys that start the game are going to come out with a certain energy and we have to reciprocate that when we get on the floor, me, Z, and Ben, and just continuing on the momentum throughout the game.

I've said this to the media constantly. Like, to me, whether it's 35 minutes, 20 minutes, like, I'm expected to go play those minutes as hard as I can, and my teammates expect the same from me and vice versa. So I'm just glad we've kind of found a certain momentum moving forward and we're just going to keep it going.

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

**Q. When you're putting this roster together, did you know that the personalities would be able to connect in the way that Andre was just talking about?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You never really know. I had a pretty good idea. Tommy was a very good voice of reason. We asked Tommy a lot. Obviously, he was very familiar with these guys. We talked a lot about competitive spirit. We talked a lot about just good people. Kyran was huge with Andrej. There was a history there.

So it was relying on some locker room guys to help ensure that the locker room stayed what we're all about. And so you know when you got a tight locker room that it's -- you got a guy like Ben Humrichous who could have left, came back. Jake Davis has been as big a part of it as anybody. He's probably our biggest leader. And then you merge freshmen in who need help and guidance, and it's just been a great mix and a great fit. But yeah, we had a pretty good idea coming in that it had a chance to be special.

**Q. What can you say about the growth of Keaton throughout the season and the poise your freshmen showed tonight?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, we knew Keaton was going

to be good early. We had a scrimmage with Florida that was very physical, very competitive, and at times he was the best player on the court. That was shocking to me.

Then how you handle a little adversity, then how you handle crowds, being on the road, and nothing fazed him. He just continued to show that poise. He gets probably not near enough credit for how tough he is because he's very unemotional and very stoic. But he's tougher than nails. And then once we got kind of pass the UConn game, we put him on the ball a lot, and we said we're going to rock with this kid, and we're going to live and die. His decision-making was good. He had to have the ball more.

Mirk then became a bigger piece of that as well. And that one took a little longer, but both those guys are great decision-makers, very skilled, and it just became kind of a two-headed monster with those two freshmen.

**Q. Specific to this game, you had mentioned in your earlier statement that Iowa came and punched you in the mouth. In the first couple minutes of the second half, Kylan drew a foul that he was upset with, but I saw you crack a little smile. Did you sense a little spark of physicality maybe in that second half that flipped that you didn't have in the first half?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I didn't have to talk much at halftime about Xs and Os. We got good shots. I just wanted to see if we would counter-punch. I thought we leveled off the first half. But I didn't think we ever really crawled in -- we had three fouls in the first half. And again, we're not out there trying to maul 'em and foul, but we had to have some tenacity and some aggressiveness. And started countering with Bam on that play, and just kind of grew from there. Obviously, it worked. Six field goals and only one of 'em was a two.

**Q. In 2017, you told the story about your administrative assistant at, I think, Stephen F. Austin. You had told her that Illinois was your dream job, and she wrote it down and presented that to you when you got the Illinois job. Moving forward nine years, taking Illinois, your dream job, to the Final Four, put that in perspective for me.**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, it's not just me. It's so many people that have helped along the way. And you believe in something so much that it drives me every single day to want to make it happen. One of the most fulfilling moments personally that I just had was standing on the ladder with the net, and then seeing our fans and being able to just -- that wasn't about me. That was about our fans, and that was about what's probably going on in Champaign right now, because that's what you believe this

to be, and you know it is.

And I've said it many times. Coaches win games. I've got a great, great staff that makes me look good. We've been able to assemble a group of players that I love coaching.

Administrators win championships. It's having that support and people that fight for you and make it possible. We play in the best league in the country, so anything's possible when it comes to winning a National Championship. But I never doubted -- and I don't want to sound arrogant. I've never doubted us getting to a Final Four would happen. I have thought we have had other teams capable. But I also know how doggone hard it is to do it. For that, I just say thank you. I say thank you to everybody involved. And I'm going to get emotional, but I've been doing this 39 years, and you dream about this as a kid, and I dreamt about doing it at Illinois.

Back in the day when my wife bought Tyler, who was maybe 2, a Brian Cook jersey, and you knew what a special place this was. And it always has been, and there's been no other thing for me. This is my dream job, and it's very fulfilling to get where we're going.

**Q. I asked Keaton earlier about his experience from the recruiting process. Curious about your initial evaluations of him as a prospect and as a player that you wanted to bring into the program.**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I was fortunate that I had a relationship with his AAU coach. His AAU coach, Victor Williams, was a high-level player at Oklahoma State and runs a just tougher-than-nails program. And everything Victor said about him, that piques your interest. You can watch film and you can find that, okay, he really shoots it and all of that stuff.

The first time I saw him live, though, we had already signed him. And it was in a game the night before he had had 36. The night I went to see him he had two. And I walked out and I couldn't wait to get my son on the phone, and I said, We just got an incredible talent. And they blitzed him, they got it out of his hand, he made every right play, he was not selfish, he was not a pig, he wasn't trying to force things. He just let the game come to him.

Very, very mature as a senior in high school when you're the guy. And he just played the game. And so I felt great about it. Did I know a 178-pound kid coming in was going to be this? I didn't. To be the South Region MVP and an All-American is, you know, I would be lying. I'm proud as heck of him, because no one works harder than him, and no one's a better human being than him.

**Q. How important was your size advantage in the way your big guys crashed the boards and kind of dominated inside?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think it's a factor. Probably a better question for Ben. I thought Tommy's two baskets back-to-back gave us a little push. I think rebounding's always been something we've been, we tried to be good at all year, but I think defensively is where we've really made an impact. I thought that we had a couple of, we call 'em Mosgows, just jump straight up and contest at the rim. Holding them to one two in the second half, I think size impacts that. I thought Andrej's size on Bennett is impactful. So, yeah, I think it's important, I think it can wear on people, it can make things difficult. We've relied on that all year being the biggest team in the country.

**Q. Wanted to speak to you just about having a guy like Coleman Hawkins coming back and being a part of this moment with your group group?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: That's the beauty of Illinois. I'm probably different than most coaches. When guys leave for whatever reason, if they have been a part of us, they're still part of my family. And I, people are going to make decisions, Coleman was four years with us. There's probably not a bigger Bears fan in the world than him. He's a diehard Illinois guy. He comes back every chance he gets. And he's always welcome. He was a part of helping us do something really special and make four NCAA tournaments. He was a great player and I love him and his family to death. It's just, it's really cool that he took the timeout to get down here and come check us out.

**Q. Andrej specifically mentioned that this is not the end, that they're not just happy getting to a Final Four, they expect more. And I know you said you want them to enjoy the moment, and certainly you guys do that, I saw the three inches of water in the locker room. But I'm curious, when did the does the party end and the Final Four prep begin?**

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Tomorrow. Tomorrow. And I think the one thing that -- you can never not celebrate winning. We work our asses off. And these guys work all year long -- and it doesn't matter, regular season games, you can ask any of 'em, we're going to have some sort of celebration after a win. And I want them to not ever feel relieved. We understand that we've got to win one more game twice to get where we want to go. That's all we talk about is winning a National Championship. We know we're going to have another opponent that's going to be very, very good whoever it is. You're going to play with the right to play in the National Championship game. And we'll get focused on that, and our staff will go to work, and it won't

be tonight though.

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