

Big Ten Basketball Media Days

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Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Illinois Fighting Illini

Men's Head Coach

Brad Underwood



THE MODERATOR: Our next coach from the University of Illinois is Head Coach Brad Underwood. Coach Underwood is entering his seventh season at Illinois after directing the Illini to their third consecutive NCAA tournament appearance.

Coach, we'll begin with your opening statement.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Thank you. Pleasure to be here in Minneapolis, and I look forward to being back here in the spring for what is always a very, very exciting Big Ten Tournament.

It's hard to imagine year seven already, but this year will be no different than any other year. This will be the best league in the country top to bottom. I think it's an exciting time for the conference under Tony's leadership with expansion, with everything else that's going on in the world. The Big Ten benefits from that.

We're adding four wonderful basketball programs to our league. We'll get through this year. I'm excited to take the journey with our team this year. I'm excited about our group, but as we all know, playing on the road in this league in front of a packed house, sell-out crowds, great coaches, great players will make it one of the best years ever and very excited to get started.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll open the floor now for questions.

Q. What would you assess is the latest on your point guard situation?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, it's good. Everybody seems to be worried about it except me. I think one of the big mistakes I made last year is I didn't play Ty Rodgers there exclusively. Ty is 6'6", been very good.

We brought another young man in at semester last year from Italy, Nico Moretti. Nico got a jump-start, so to speak, with practice time, in the weight room. Nico was fantastic on our trip to Spain.

Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn, Sencire Harris. Sencire started 14, 15 games last year at that spot, and Dra is a guy that has on our trip to Spain played there a lot.

I feel really good about it. We're multi-dimensional. We have scoring there. We have passing. We've got size. I think one of the advantages of our team is positionally we can be very, very big. Starting Ty there, you know, 6'6" with a 6'11" wing span. You have Terrence Shannon at the two. 6'6" or 6'7", and then multiple options at the three, four, and five.

They're all 6'7", 6'8", so I think that could be a real positive thing for us.

Q. You have been in this league long enough now to see the lack of separation at times in the standings. As you look ahead to this year, what do you think will be the difference between the teams that are kind of at the bottom of that log jam that we generally see in the middle and what could separate a team at the top?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think we're in an interesting time in college basketball just because of COVID, and we have maybe the biggest age discrepancy ever. 23, 24-year-olds playing against 17, 18-year-olds sometimes.

You know, last year I think it played out a little bit that we saw some very old teams be very successful. We had one of those in our league, Penn State. I think that can be something that separates.

Obviously a team that's tough enough to go on the road and win in this league. Road wins are like gold. You like to stockpile those if you can get them, but it takes tremendous leadership, tremendous charisma, character for your team to do that and maturity.

I think that that's usually the defining moment, but top to bottom this league has great coaches, great players. I think other than maybe Purdue because of Zach, you could probably throw them all in a hat and pull them out and say, hey, they could finish here and not be shocked.



Q. Your numbers defensively with Coleman and Terrence and Ty together were really good. How do you massage the two other guys in that five-man line-up in that? How do they make their life a little bit easier?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: That's the plan. We know those guys are really good. Coleman Hawkins I think is one of the elite defenders in college basketball. He can positionally guard one through five.

Terrence Shannon I think is one of the better two-way players. Last year we had a lot of youth. We made a lot of mistakes. I'm hoping experience. I'm hoping size at some different spots, and we're trying very, very hard just to be consistent on that end.

I think we've got a plethora of guys that we can throw out there, but we want to match their level. There's no doubt. Ty has proven he can be one of the top rebounding guards in the country. He's tough. He's physical. He's in much better shape. He's dropped about 20 pounds since last year, so he is leaner, more athletic.

Those three guys are a good starting point, but I like some of the things our other guys have done.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Underwood, thank you for your time.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Thank you.

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