

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 13, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Andrej Stojakovic

Keaton Wagler

Postgame Press Conference



Wisconsin - 91, Illinois - 88

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Illinois head coach Brad Underwood, along with student-athletes Andrej Stojakovic and Keaton Wagler.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Give Wisconsin a lot of credit, they were much better at staying consistent. It was a tale of two halves for us, especially on the defensive side. I thought we were very, very good in the first half. I thought we had great focus. We did something that we talked about, not giving them 2s.

The second half was just, for a team that leads the country in fewest fouls committed, when you parade somebody to the line and have a discrepancy like that, you're not going to win.

Let me make sure I get my numbers right. They shot 2 in the first half, then 18, and then 10. We're a team that draws a lot of fouls, and we weren't even close to those numbers. So you're not going to win when you put a team like that at the foul line.

Again, give them credit. Boyd was terrific. Literally just getting to the foul line 13 times. We had a nice 15-point lead in the second half. Then we got, I think, complacent. We got some good shots. We missed some open looks. They just chipped away.

Give them credit. Their two guards were terrific today. Obviously the difference in the game.

Q. This question is for Keaton. I just want to get your thoughts on this message from Coach after this loss, with the one-and-done season approach.

KEATON WAGLER: His message to us was this loss isn't the end for us. We've just got to learn from this. We've got to be focused on what wins games, which is defense and rebounding. We got out rebounded tonight. We can't let that happen if we want to win games.

So that was just the main message. He was like we've got to get back focused. We've got a week to prepare for the NCAA Tournament.

Q. For either of you guys, it feels like when the offense is firing, the energy is there on all sides of the court. How can you guys keep that energy during stagnant offensive periods?

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Just keep sharing the ball. You're right, it does get stagnant at times during the game. We just have to keep trusting each other. This period is where we trust each other like no other, and we have to stay consistent in that. I think that's the number one thing.

Q. For either of you, you both had periods where it felt like you took over. Andrej in the first half, Keaton at times in the second half. Do you ever feel the need in those situations to just keep going? I know both of you pass it off a lot. Mirk had some 3's and opportunities. But do either of you feel maybe this should be my game and do it all?

KEATON WAGLER: I wouldn't say that really. We all trust each other, and if one of us is scoring the ball, we're going to keep looking for him. It's just different points of the game where you see what the defense is doing and see who they're taking away and what options we have.

It's not really just like an okay, I'm hitting shots. I'm going to keep shooting every shot. It's more about reading the defense and what they're giving us.

Q. Keaton, obviously you've carried a heavy minute load all season. You've battled through some nagging injuries over the last couple weeks. Where do you feel you are physically now after a 32-game regular season



as you go into the tournament?

KEATON WAGLER: I think that I'm as good as I can feel right now. Today in the game I was feeling fine. I wasn't really tired at all.

What's good about -- it's never good to lose, but with this loss, we have a whole week, like I said earlier to prepare to get our legs feeling good, get our bodies feeling good for the tournament. I'm feeling just ready to go. That's what I would say.

Q. Fourth overtime game this year, losing all four. Do you feel like this prepares you in a way for the NCAA to have those overtime games and the pressure of that throughout the season?

ANDREJ STOJAKOVIC: Any loss stings, but when it comes in overtime, and it happens a few times like you mentioned, all we can do is learn from it. There's nothing we take away from this game and not apply and try to fix the mistakes that we made. All we can do is move on and apply the lessons from this game and move forward.

KEATON WAGLER: He said it really well. Just keep learning from these games, and just know for us, like when we let a team get out early, get a lead early, it's hard to come back in a short period of time. It just comes down to our defense getting stops, finishing out the possession with a rebound, and then just staying focused on our offensive game plan.

Q. We saw you nodding there with that question about the stagnant offense. What do you feel like changes when you guys are firing and there's energy and then shots aren't going down and it seems like energy is not there is what you're thinking?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I'm not worried about the offense. I'm worried about what it does on the other end. We've got the Number 1 offense in college basketball, and we got really good shots again today.

Sometimes I think, when we make shots, we get casual on the other end, and we think it's just easy. I had that feeling today. Then all of a sudden they get going, and now it's a shootout. I don't want shootouts.

Again, give them credit. They did what they had to do, which was get to the foul line, but I do think that we've got to -- you know, Kylan Boswell is a senior. We talked about not giving reject ball screens to John Blackwell, and first or second play of the second half, he gives up a reject ball screen. That's stuff we didn't do one time in the first half.

Those are the mental lapses and mental mistakes that are just driving me nuts. That's the consistency with which we struggled with today.

Q. In the first overtime game against Wisconsin in Champaign, Boyd and Blackwell combined for 49 to help push them over the line. What about their games make them so difficult to guard in tight games like they did today?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: They both get fouled a ton. They're both two of the top guys, so you've got to try to guard them without fouling them. Then they're both guys that are very adept at 3-point shooters.

Now, Boyd is -- I think he's shooting 17 percent off the bounce from 3, and Blackwell is shooting 28 percent off the bounce from 3. But they do a great job of their bigs. Bieliauskas especially, Bieliauskas is a hidden gem for them. He's very smart and sets ball screens, and he sets them at angles that force it that it's hard to go under. When they get in those middle ball screens, both of those guys are very effective.

Very difficult to guard, both great finishers.

Q. What were the key points from this game that will help this team going into the NCAA Tournament later on in the month?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You get out rebounded, you go home. If we're not consistent on the defensive side, we'll go home. Again, offensively we've been gifted, and we are. The other night we didn't shoot the ball very well, and maybe it's the United Center. We lost a game to Alabama here when we didn't make free throws either. For a team that's top 10 in the country in free throw rate, that's frustrating.

Again, you got to do all the little things to win. That's it. It's the rebounding. It's the defensive consistency. And we didn't have that today.

Q. Obviously your offense has been predicated on offensive rebounding, but this is the second game against Wisconsin this year where you didn't get back 30 percent of your misses. What's the Kryptonite from an offensive standpoint from this Wisconsin team?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: They do a great job of blocking out. Their guards are good. I'll have to ask Greg after the year why they're so good at it.

I don't know, our effort has to be better. I think we put Ben in. Ben got a couple early in the first half. And our

offensive rebound effort is as -- no matter how much we work on it in practice, somehow it's not carrying over right now.

It was -- Mirk had three, which was good, and Ben had two, which we had early. There's zeros pretty much by everybody else. We've got to get other guys on the glass rebounding. We've got to get Dre there. We've got to get Jake there. We've got to get Keaton there. Kylan's got to get there. It's got to be a collective group.

Q. Brad, you kind of laid it out, but do you feel like this is an effort issue on defense or an Xs and Os issue when you hold them to 10 for 41 from 3 and they still score 91?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think we're playing really hard. I think we're trying. I think we're playing really, really hard. I think that a guard like Boyd is hard to handle. When he gets fouled at a high rate -- again, he's downhill. You can do many different things in coverage, and again, we did a better job on him in the first game, and they kick it to bigs for 3s. It's kind of pick your poison.

I didn't think we won the point of attack very well. Kylan played in foul trouble all night, was for the most part a non-participant, even though he did play very well in his minutes. But we need his tenacity defensively.

Again, it takes everybody. I thought the first half we were -- couldn't have had a better game plan, and somehow the second half, we just got away from it.

Q. How challenging has it been to get the chemistry right with this group? You're playing well when Kylan was in early in the season. You played well when he was out. Now he's back. It's a good thing, but you've still got to pick the right lineup at the right time and get it all working.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I'm not lying, it's hard. It's not easy. We've had a lot of those challenges this year from first semester all through. This is very similar to our elite 8 season, when we were without Terrance for a while and getting him back. He stunk when he got back. He wasn't very good right away. It takes a little while to find that.

We've been starting Jake and bringing Dre off the bench. There were some positives to that, some negatives. It's just I like our group a lot. I think we've got great, great team chemistry. Some of that is we've got to find that on the court as well.

Q. Brad, you're 4 of 5 out of your last nine games. Four losses in overtime, all to really good teams that

are going to be playing next week and maybe beyond. What kind of message do you take to your team? Is it back off, loosen up, everything's fine? Or is it ramp up the pressure, we need to be tighter in certain areas? What's kind of the message, and how do you think you can help your team move past this?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think it's that message. It's what you said. We're really good. We've lost some -- we're a possession away in a lot of games from being one of the best teams record-wise in the country. I still think we're one of the best teams in the country.

Yet you've got to find somebody to make those shots, get that stop, and it's not a combination of a lot of things. It's a combination of a very few small things that maybe a player steps up and hits a shot and that flips. Maybe we make free throws when the pressure is on the game, we get a defensive rebound. It's one thing.

They're trying really, really hard. I thought we played loose today. I thought we played competitive. That's how we've got to stay, competitive. This group likes to be loose. I thought they were very, very loose, to a point where they're too loose. We've got to stay focused, especially when the game comes easy for us on the offensive end.

Q. Hey, Brad, kind of similar. I wasn't there, and I don't know what went into it. A few days ago you were asked about close games and you said you didn't appreciate the topic. I was wondering if you could elaborate. What's the right way or the fair way to look at --

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We won a lot of close games. You want to win the Purdue game? You want to win -- you start looking and go right down the list. It's not a narrative one way or the other. We own the fact that we've gotten beat in those, but we've also won a lot of close ones. We've also had guys make a lot of very good plays.

Is this a story if you get beat 20? It's not. It's because they're one-possession games. I have to do better. I have to help them in those moments. But I think it's more of one possession type situation that we have to understand that we can't take any possession off. I think that's what I'm trying to get this group to understand. It's one rebound.

You can't be lazy mentally and not block out. John Blackwell gets a rebound with no blockout at the end of the game. If we get it, we win. If we get a rebound in the Michigan State game in East Lansing, we win. If we get a stop against -- and a rebound against UCLA, we win.

But before that, Keaton made the shot at UCLA. If we get

the stop, then Keaton's the story. I don't like narratives. I like figuring out how to solve the problems, and that's what we've got to do. It's just one possession here or there. That's what this group has to understand. Today I thought it was just a lack of focus.

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