

Division I Football Championship: Montana State vs Illinois State

Saturday, January 3, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

FirstBank Stadium

Montana State Bobcats Brent Vigen

Pregame Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good morning and welcome to Nashville and the 2026 FCS Football Championship Weekend.

It's my honor to introduce once again Montana State, their head coach Brent Vigen. Coach, opening comments. Congratulations on a great year.

BRENT VIGEN: Thanks a lot, yeah, we're real excited to be back and real excited to be here in Nashville. This opportunity we don't take lightly. It's a long road to get here. Thinking about where this team started back in January, a lot of guys off the previous team weren't there, and there was a lot of work that was in front of us.

Just so proud of our guys for believing in the mission and being about just continuing to get better all the way through it, whether that was the spring, the summer, and then ultimately through this season.

We started out really tough opponent that's still alive on the FBS side in Oregon and, I think, learned a lot about ourselves that day. Came back home and had a really tough loss, but again, I think we learned a lot about ourselves, double overtime loss to South Dakota State.

This team just continued to move forward. Here we are again and want to do everything we can to make the best of this opportunity. I think we arrive here a fairly healthy team for this time of year and a team that, in our hopes, still has a chance to play our best football.

A lot of respect for our opponent Illinois State. They've taken a long road, 16 games, 4 playoff wins on the road, and they're a challenging opponent on both sides of the ball.

Really excited about the opportunity. Grateful for the



NCAA, for Nashville for hosting such a premium event here, and Vanderbilt as well. With that, I'll open it up.

Q. Just your impressions of Nashville so far?

BRENT VIGEN: I've been here a few times. Our coaches convention is often held at the Gaylord. What a fantastic property and what a huge property. I think the first impression for our guys is, Coach, you said this was big. This is huge. There's a lot to it.

That's been great, just getting on campus here and getting to the stadium, it appears to be a great venue for the championship game. I'm sure our fans are more than enjoying Broadway and all that Nashville has to offer.

I think it's a great site and really looking forward to seeing it all -- how it all ends up when the dust settles.

Q. First and foremost, you're back. You start 0-2. You got the 10-game streak. You get to the playoffs. You play in the Cinderella. No Dakotas to be found now. I would say the mindset of this football team, as well as the coaching staff, is we've been here before. We haven't gotten it done. What's the mindset to get it done now?

BRENT VIGEN: You want to learn from history. You want to learn from the past, but you don't want to lean on it at the same time. I think it's appreciating the opportunity, appreciating all the work, the improvement that's gone on through the course of the -- almost a year now.

We met on January 14 for the first time with this team. I think it's been about this team. Again, learning from history, but not dwelling on it at the same time.

I think this group has really done a good job of going after each and every opportunity. They haven't all been perfect by any means, none of them have, but I think we've been very resilient along the way.

So make it about this opponent and this opportunity, more so the opportunity, and go after it like we have every week.

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Q. Third national title appearance, three Big Sky titles. What are some factors that contributed to building such sustained success so quickly here in Bozeman, and what would a win on Monday night mean for the program and for you personally?

BRENT VIGEN: I think getting to Bozeman back in '21, there was clearly a foundation laid. The team had been to the semifinals in '19, and it was what can we do to build upon that foundation? What can we do to continue to raise the bar as far as our expectations go? To do that, you need a ton of support.

That certainly starts with our administration. Certainly President Cruzado at the time. I know President Tessman, Leon's been here for a decade now, and his vision and his support and wanting to continue to raise the bar is in line with certainly where I'm at.

Then we've continued to recruit, I think, guys that appreciate where they're at, are hungry, competitive guys. So when you graduate whatever, you might lose a few guys, the next guys step in. We've been able to attract some really good coaches at the same time and just had a forward thinking mindset.

Again, expectations are one thing, but do you have the support that allows you to meet those expectations, and we do. Our fan support and the way our donors continue to step up is right in line with our expectations.

There's a lot of hands that have contributed to this sustained success. What it would mean, I think, it would be completing this mission. It's a culmination of this season, but it's the efforts of a lot of people over many, many years. There's so many people that have played a part in our ascent, so to speak.

We need to go win a football game, but I know it would mean a lot to people for sure.

Q. Coach if you didn't mind, could you talk a little bit about Lamson. I looked up an article where he committed to Syracuse and Wyoming was one of his final choices. I assume you had a little bit to do with the recruitment and talk about how it came full circle you and him.

BRENT VIGEN: It comes back to '19/ 20, Justin was a high target of ours. I had a chance to go out to Sacramento, to his high school, talk to his high school coach, see him throw, get to know him. It became the COVID situation with recruiting, so when Justin came to Laramie, I couldn't have any contact with him than

seriously looking out my second floor office window and kind of waving to him, but he was serious about us.

Then Syracuse, Louisville I know in particular came about, and he ended up choosing Syracuse. It was probably back in the beginning of December last year. He went in the portal after going to Stanford. I certainly recall what I thought of him as a high school player. He was clearly our target as we went through December.

It was as much about what I felt about him as a high school player. He had played at Stanford and done some good things, so you could see the physical piece that was potentially there as well. I felt like, we felt like he would be the guy that he's become.

He visited right prior to our South Dakota semifinal game last year, loved it, but he still had a quarter, a winter quarter at Stanford to complete. Completing a Stanford degree made a lot of sense to me, not only what it made to him. So that complicated matters. Ultimately, he chose to go to Bowling Green. I still remember getting that call, which was essentially about 50 weeks ago -- it was next week actually, so 51 weeks, whatever it was.

Just disappointed that we couldn't make it work because I think he wanted to make it work. The way it worked out, our coach left, and he came back calling. It was the way the story was meant to be wrote because he really didn't choose us simply because he didn't think he could go through spring ball. That's the type of kid he is, just one who wants to do everything he can to make the most of the opportunity.

I think we've seen that play out through his time with us, starting in the late spring and the summer and fall, and he's just continued to get better and better. Crazy story, and the relationship that's between us has gone back quite a ways. To now have it come to fruition like it has, just grateful that things work out the way they do.

Q. Coach, you said you don't dwell on the past, but for this team, how much do they feel like they have unfinished business after the game last year? And if you could capitalize this time around, would it be validation for the program you've talked about building?

BRENT VIGEN: Well, I think our consistency and getting here three times to this game, now our program has been in the semifinals 5 out of 6 years, I think we've established ourselves. The program has performed consistently, and I don't think that's going away. But to be able to finish this journey off, yeah, I think it's what we're all after.

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I think this is such a new team where I don't -- yeah, there's a fair amount of motivation from us coming up short last year, but it's become -- it immediately became about this team. There were so many new pieces. I think it would be validation for this team of how far we've come.

We had so many unknowns back at the beginning of it, back mid-January of last year, and these pieces have continued to come together, and this team has come together. That's players. That's coaches. That's the whole thing. I really think it's about this team, this group of guys and validating itself, rather than really making right by the previous seasons. The previous seasons were part of the story for sure.

Q. Describe how special this season has been to have your son Jake there, and the rooting section, you have a feeling from North Dakota that you're here and the Bison are not.

BRENT VIGEN: I'm just concerned that we're here, that's all I really care about. To have now two sons on the team, and this is Jake's fourth year, Grant's first year, Myles, my nephew, is on the team as well.

Yeah, I think the cool thing is Jake is Jake Vigen. He's not the Coach's kid. He's Jake. It was pretty immediate from the start, I think Grant has certainly followed his lead. You just want your sons to have their own experience, to appreciate it, to love it for what it is. I think they've done that.

In certainly over five years, Bozeman is our home. It's been a great place for Molly, and Luke is a freshman in high school. The you just want, wherever you're at, you want it to be where you're at. You want your family to enjoy it, and they certainly have done that.

I guess for Jake this has been a really enjoyable experience. He doesn't get on the field a whole lot, but his contribution, I think he understands what it means, and he's loving life.

Q. We haven't talked about the Redbirds, your opponent. Now, if you look at them, they're the Cinderella story this year. You have a team that's championship built and ready. They've knocked off a little of that Cinderella talk with four big wins, two against two of the top three teams in the country. How do you prepare the team to know, hey, we know we're supposed to win this on paper, but let's not get complacent and lose to this team.

BRENT VIGEN: I think, as you go along and it gets narrowed from 24 to 16, 16 to 8, 8 to 4, 4 to 2, and two

teams are vying to be the top one, these guys are here for a good reason. Regardless of what you don't know about any of these programs, you learn in a hurry that they belong here, and Illinois State has proven that.

Stubbed their toe a couple times in conference play, but we all know the Missouri Valley, that's a gauntlet to go through. Certainly going up to Fargo and winning in the fashion that they did, I think our guys are fully aware that's a huge mountain to climb.

The fact that they've gone in a row, they've gone coast to coast, they've played 16 games, and they're clearly playing their best right now, they've certainly found themselves. So they've got our full attention. They're good on both sides of the football. They're good up front on both sides of the football. They have play makers. There's certainly not one dimension to them, I guess.

We've been on a run now. We closed the regular season playing UC Davis and University of Montana and now our three playoff games. I think our last five opponents in particular have all been a little bit different even though one was the same, but even the dynamics of playing the University of Montana a couple times.

I think this team has done a good job of respecting each and every opponent, trying to do everything we can to make the best of every opportunity. They have our full attention, though, there's no question. They're a very good football team and well coached, and they've got talent. No different than the teams I remember from Coach Spack back '09 to 2013 when I coached against him.

Q. Wondering if there's any update to your last injury update.

BRENT VIGEN: I think for Caden in particular, again, he's doing everything he can to be a part of it. I anticipate he's going to be out there. He's practiced quite a bit over the last week. I really appreciate that.

I think he, immediately the Sunday after that Saturday game, he said, Coach, I'm going to do everything I can to play, and I think we're in position for that to come to reality.

Otherwise, we are very healthy, and we make this trip with 70 guys dressing and JJ Dolan, though, is the only one that's played significantly that's not part of that 70. That doesn't mean the accumulation of the season, the bumps and bruises and stuff hasn't taken a toll on these guys, but that's football.

A lot of credit goes to strength staff, training staff for their work, continued work, and our guys' commitment to that.

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Considering we're here and it's our 16th opportunity, deep, deep into the season obviously, I think I like where our health is at.

Q. Going back six years ago, kind of the biggest gap this team faced versus the NDSUs of the world was offensive and defensive lines. How have you been able to close that gap so that you can consistently compete at this level with the guys you have up front?

BRENT VIGEN: We've certainly made it a priority. I'm not saying it wasn't a priority before. It comes down to really having a pretty keen eye on recruiting and then turning those guys over to Sean Herrin and his staff and letting them go to work.

I love the fact that our offensive and defensive line, half of those guys are from the state of Montana. I know, when those guys came on campus, they didn't look like they look now. So being able to identify those guys first from our state that could really develop and become what they've become was a key element. I think we've been able to do that a little bit more than had been done previously.

I think having a lot of competition within both those groups is critical. We play eight guys consistently on the defensive line, so those guys can't take anything for granted. I know, if we had to play more than the five we play, we could on the offensive line. So that means when one guy graduates, there's another guy stepping in or whatever.

So this has been a really big priority. Then I think our style of football is attractive to those guys maybe from the out of state element to say, okay, this is a place that highlights the offensive line, is really leaning on the defensive line as far as how we play our defense. I think these are the types of systems these guys want to play in.

You don't win this time of year without good line play. I certainly knew that. Again, that's not the way they were previously looking at it, but we've just been able to take it to another level.

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