

Division I Football Championship: Montana State vs Illinois State

Saturday, January 3, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

FirstBank Stadium

Illinois State Redbirds

Brock Spack

Pregame Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon again. We've got Coach Brock Spack, the head coach of Illinois State joining us now.

Coach Spack, congratulations. Great to see you back at the National Championship Game.

BROCK SPACK: It's great to be back. Took a while, 11 years, but it's great to be back.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go with opening comments from coach. Talk a little about the season.

BROCK SPACK: Obviously we're grateful to be here and thank everyone who's involved in the game. We appreciate all the hard work that the city of Nashville, Vanderbilt University, the NCAA, and all the committee members who are involved in putting this on. It's a tremendous deal for our players and coaching staff.

Appreciate it. I know our university is head over heels happy about this. Appreciate all you do.

Our season was interesting. We felt, I felt if we could get into the playoff, into the tournament, so to speak, that we would have a chance. I know that when everybody saw where North Dakota State was at, it was a little concerning, but this team has been really good on the road. For whatever reasons they've been able to -- they're comfortable being uncomfortable is probably the best term I can say.

They're just a great group of guys. We have really good students, really good kids. They've been raised right, good parents, and done a really good job.

Excited to be here and can't wait to play on Monday night.

Q. Coach, as you heard, you're back. They said you don't belong here. They said your team is Cinderella. Yet four weeks in a row, you answered that call in hostile territory. You're on neutral ground now. The other team on paper is supposed to take care of business with no problem. Why is that wrong? How have you gotten here? And the mentality of the boys now?

BROCK SPACK: We can't really -- we don't have anything to do with what people say and why we should be where we're at and that kind of thing. It's a pretty easy question. Our players are just -- they have shut off the outside noise. I don't read social media or any of that stuff myself, but they have not brought it up, and we have not talked about being underdogs and Cinderella and all that stuff and miracles.

You don't win four in a row in a tournament like this and be a Cinderella, my opinion. We come from a great football conference. Arguably, our two leagues are the premier leagues in FCS, but there's a lot of great leagues. I think all of Missouri Valley gets us ready for a tournament like this because every weekend you have to be ready to play in our league.

Hat's off to all our brothers in the Missouri Valley. They've gotten our team ready to play in this type of environment. That's about all I can say. I think our league is so tough. It seems like every weekend it's a playoff caliber game.

Q. Obviously Victor Dawson had some big games during the regular season, but when Wenkers went down in that first playoff game, Victor really stepped into that primary running back role and had some really big games. Talk about what he's meant in this postseason run. Is Wenkers going to be healthy for the championship game?

BROCK SPACK: I'll answer the first question. Wenkers will play and he'll be available to play. That won't be an issue.

Victor has been great. Whatever we've asked him to do,



he's done. We had a three-headed monster, I guess. We had three guys that we were kind of leaning on. We have some younger backs too that can do some things for us. But when Wenkers went down, Victor kind of took over the No. 1 spot, and he's done a great job there. He's a good player. He's a physical back.

He's had a little adversity in his career. He had an ACL over now two years ago, and he's been really good. He's a 600-pound squatter, if that makes -- for a running back, that's awfully good. He's a strong downhill runner, and he fits our offense pretty well.

He's done a great job and has been here now just barely a year. It's been awesome.

Q. Curious how impactful you think Kye Stewart has been to your defense and your special teams throughout his time here. Is it special for him to get to coach for a championship in his hometown?

BROCK SPACK: Yeah, I mean, Kye -- you're right. He's a hometown guy. He's been instrumental. He's our assistant head coach. A lot of people ask, what does that mean? Well, he does everything I don't want to do. I put it on his plate. He's great. He has a very good attitude. He's a former Redbird. He's a very good player.

The only reason he's not in the Hall of Fame yet is he has to be away from ISU five years in a row, and he's coaching now, but he will be someday. He was a great player. Even a better coach and a better person. He's just a really good mentor of young men and a great guy.

I can only imagine -- you'd have to ask him -- but having been at my alma mater as long as I was, I can tell you that means a lot. Coach Niekamp, Travis Niekamp is an ISU guy, and he's been here off and on several times. Harold Etheridge was here for nine years before, and now he's back. Cody Deti has been with me since I was at University of Wyoming, and that's a long time ago.

There's a lot of ISU people involved in our football program, and I think that's really important. C.J. Irvin, he's a former player too. Just got a lot of good guys. It means a lot to them.

Q. I'm curious, when you guys lost that last game the way you did to Southern Illinois, was there any doubt that you'd get into the tournament? How did you reset from that point on to get to this place? What would it mean to win ultimately?

BROCK SPACK: No, I don't think there was any doubt. I think there was a lot of doubt whether we would be a seed,

and we weren't. I don't think there was as much of a doubt there. I don't know how you wouldn't let an eight-win team from the Valley in, after losing to Oklahoma and North Dakota State.

I would say that was a teaching moment for our players. These guys are smart guys, and they reset. They have to understand you can't forget those kind of lessons in your life. As the coach at Notre Dame said, you've got to feel the pain of not being successful. All the joy of winning all these games, but you can't forget what it's like to be on the other side.

I think this team relishes their opportunity. They know they stubbed their toe and got our butts kicked basically. That's kind of what I mean by the Valley. You learn lessons in our league because, if you're not ready to play, you're going to get beat. That was a big lesson for us.

Yeah, I thought we should have been in. I think we're -- hey, whatever, not being seeded all that stuff, that's on us. That's not on anybody but the Birds. We put ourselves in that bind, but the good news is we kind of battled our way through it and battled our way out of it, and here we are playing for a National Championship.

Q. How many of those boys are there whose last name is Niekamp? Do you have any more of them waiting in the wings? Are you recruiting other schools?

BROCK SPACK: No, Dex will be the last of them from this immediate Niekamp family. They're both great kids; mom and dad have done a great job of raising them. Tye is the more decorated one of them. He's been here longer, and he's done a great job. Tough, physical, what you think of, really locked in, understands the game, like another coach on the field, what you think a coach's son should be like.

Dex is a little quieter. He's not as boisterous as Tye is, but maybe, I hate to say this, maybe the best athlete in the family. And I know that makes Tye really angry, but he's a very -- he's a big kid. He's long like his dad. He's 6'4", 260, and he's just 18, 19 years old. He's going to be a really, really good player moving forward. He's going to be better than he will be Monday night. He's gotten better all year long, but I think there's still a huge upside for him.

Q. How personally gratifying is this run after the COVID year where you had to shut down football, to have this five years later and a chance to win this thing for the first time?

BROCK SPACK: Yeah, it means a lot because for whatever reason -- I'm not going to -- COVID kicked us right in the behind. We had to basically retool our whole



program again and restart.

I think it was because we had an older team in '20. It was a very veteran group. Not knowing what was going to happen, they said, Coach you've got to play. A couple of the Group of 5 and Power 4 -- or Power 5 at that time -- were going to play again, and FCS we couldn't get started, so we were going to play in the spring. We didn't know if we were going to play, so we helped them find a place to play.

Some guys were in the Senior Bowl, East-West Shrine. They wanted to go to combine and all that stuff and get ready for pro-football. A lot of guys didn't play in the spring, and it was really bad for us. So I pulled our team out of it. I thought it was really dangerous to have three defensive linemen left and have five games to play and come back two months later to play another season. I just didn't think that was safe.

I told our parents that, and they were relieved. I think our parents were relieved, but we had to restart and rebuild. I took my time on this one because I wanted to make sure we did it right, we had some time to get it right. I felt I had a really good staff. Had a couple guys leave in between now and then, but not many. So this staff has been intact. Really like them. They're great men, good people, great family men, they come from great families. We took players that kind of fit that whole role. Not everybody, but most of our players are that way.

It's important that these guys are -- it's hard to be disciplined in one form of your life and be undisciplined in another, and trying to find those guys who are really disciplined in everything they do. They're achieving -- they're overachievers, if you will, or just achieving, driven guys, and achievement is what makes them take. That's kind of our quarterback.

Our quarterback is that way. If you haven't met Tommy, you'll see him, okay, nice kid, but he looks like the guy in the front row of physics class. He's that guy. But he's a competitor. He's tough. He's a good athlete, and he really competes on Saturdays, and it's hard to keep him down. He's a really good leader.

That's kind of the team we wanted to put together, a lot of guys like you've had at North Dakota State. Really the same mantra. Just wanted to put a group of guys together you're really happy to be around.

Very little comes across my desk. Very, very few issues at all. Probably typical boy stuff every so often, but nothing that's any type of issue. They police themselves. Usually stuff gets taken care of before it gets to me. So just a

really, really good group of guys.

Q. Coach, down two scores North Dakota State. I told your opposing coach you guys don't have to worry about the Dakotas now. Down to 14, myself and many have thought, there goes the end of the run. You come back to tie it, you come back from the two scores, but you make the decision, one point or two? You go for two to get the win, and you get the win. What was the mindset on that? And great call.

BROCK SPACK: Well, thank you. Actually, that decision was made on Wednesday. I called the staff together, and I said, listen, if we have to score -- having played there so often and been in so many tight games and know how good they are at home closing games out and they're on such a run and a great football team and a great defense -- I said, fellas, if we score late in the game and it's a difference between going for two to win it and having to go to overtime, I don't know if we can beat them in overtime.

I felt that it's three yards. It's three yards to keep yourself alive for a National Championship. If we can't make three yards, we probably don't deserve to be here. It comes down to one play, and that's what I decided, and the staff was in agreement. We told the players ahead of time, if that came up, that's how we were going to play that game.

There was no -- I'm glad it happened that way because there was no excitement, hey, are we going for two or not going for two? Our offense was -- the player bringing in the play, and they were all ready to go on the next play. We knew what we were going to do, and we were going for two.

That's how you have to play up there in order to beat them. You have to play to win. You can't just sit there and say, okay, we'll take it to overtime. I just felt their offense is so tough to stop in the red zone that you just -- as you all know, that's where the game's played in overtime in college. I didn't feel we'd win that battle.

Q. Brock, you talked about being 11 years since you were in this point and then detailed the COVID struggles. To be back on this stage, what would it mean for you and for ISU to hoist that trophy on Monday night, if you could?

BROCK SPACK: It would mean a lot obviously. I think this is my 42nd year. Is it my 42nd year? I can't remember, of coaching college football. So playing that would be 46 years -- since I was 18 years old, that's all I've ever done, either played college football or coached it. So to finally get there would be awesome.

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That's why I keep coming back is to do this. I'm not really motivated by money. I'm not saying like look how great a guy I am. I'm just not that motivated with that. I'm motivated by success. That's the ultimate success in our sport is to win a National Championship. I think that would be awesome.

I told our team there's only one 1. There's only one first time. Everybody talks about the '14 team around our place. The bison talk about our '14 team. We talk about their '14 team. I think we'll be tied at the hip for the rest of our lives because of that game which is great. I said, fellas, you have the chance to do something that no one's ever done. There's only can be one first.

It would mean a lot to them, especially how they've gotten here. We're getting ready to play our 17th game. Just think about that, 17 football games for a college kid, that's a lot of games. To be here -- that's why the tournament is set up. You're at a disadvantage when you don't have a bye. Then you've got to play four games to get to the title. You're at a disadvantage all along, but that's part of our fault too. We didn't win enough games to be a seeded team.

But I think it would be huge for these guys to do that. We're here, so why not, right? Why not us?

Q. A lot of these guys in your core group have been in this program for multiple years. Some of them, this is the only program they've ever known. In this day of college athletics, what does that say about your culture that you've been able to keep these guys, retain them, and actually develop them unlike other programs that look to the portal to build teams these days?

BROCK SPACK: I would be less than dishonest to say we don't work the portal. We try. We've been trying to figure out who's available right now and which one of our guys might be getting in and all that stuff. Who knows about that?

Before I came down here, I said I'm not even going to think about all that until this game's over with. But you're right. I think I read somewhere that we, our two schools, we lost the least amount maybe in our league or maybe in the FCS. I don't know if that's true or not.

I think it tells you, number one, we have a great university. We have a cool place to go to college. It's a great town. It has a lot of options, and there's really good people, really good leadership there. I think our people are really, really good. Our players are really good.

I think our players have built this culture. I'd like to say it's all about us, the coaches, but it's hard for you to kind of say, okay, you're going to act like this. They have to kind of make that decision themselves. Our players have done a really good job throughout the years I've been there, for 17 years now, that built this product.

I took something out of North Dakota State. We invited all of our football alums to our practice on Friday. I asked Coach Klieman, what was all that going on there, a couple years ago? They said we're going to bring all our alums that are thrilled to be there. You forget about the guys that built the base and the foundation of what we're about to do on Monday and play for on Monday. It's not always winning teams, it's not always championship teams, but it's guys who have really been through it all and they fight through all that. It's just a cool thing.

I think this team has really done a good job of fostering that, as you said, a culture, and it's been a really positive culture. I hear that a lot from guys that come in from outside our programs. Coach, it's a really good culture. I said, I'm glad to hear that because a lot went into getting that to that point.

Just win, baby. Just win.

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