

# Division I Football Championship: Montana State vs Illinois State

Monday, January 5, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

FirstBank Stadium

**Illinois State Redbirds**  
**Coach Brock Spack**  
**Tommy Rittenhouse**  
**Tye Niekamp**

Postgame Press Conference

Montana State 35, Illinois State 34

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from Illinois State is student-athletes Tommy Rittenhouse and Tye Niekamp and also Head Coach Brock Spack.

What we will do is we will have a quick opening statement by Coach. Then we'll have questions for the student-athletes. We'll give them a little bit of time, and then we'll go ahead and release them, then we'll keep Coach Spack here for a little while longer to visit, answer some questions.

Coach, a quick opening comment.

BROCK SPACK: Well, congratulations to Montana State and a hard-fought win. It was a tough game, but I'm very proud of our team, the way we competed. Didn't expect anything less from them.

Just couldn't find one more play, and we needed to make one more play in order to win it. But when you look at a game, it's a one-point loss like that, there's probably 10, 15, maybe even 20 plays in the game, if you just make one of them, you win it. Weren't able to do that, and we came up a little short.

But I'm just really proud of our team. They've fought through a lot to get here. Heard a lot about how they -- the Cinderella thing. This is a really good football team. Just really proud of them and the leadership of these guys next to me and throughout our team (indiscernible) really helped us, and this is a really good team for us.



With that, I'll open it up for questions.

**Q. Tommy, could you just share your emotions? It was a lot of ups and downs tonight and just how you guys played in the second half, can you share a little bit about that?**

TOMMY RITTENHOUSE: Yeah, first and foremost, I want to give all glory to God. I couldn't be here without Him.

Yeah, just, I mean -- yeah, really wanted this one. I think it was a football game we made our adjustments. We started off kind of slow as an offense, and you know, they're a great defense, so they made some plays. But like Coach said, we definitely left some out there. Definitely some I want back.

But to go out like this, it's pretty fun, I guess, except we're on the losing end. I can't be more grateful for the ISU community, the boys that I played with tonight, and everything that I've been gifted.

**Q. I know the emotions are raw right now, but when you look at what this group accomplished, how much you guys were able to do, what did it mean to be able to have this type of season with this group?**

TOMMY RITTENHOUSE: Yeah, it was special. You know, at least for me, it's my last year. I don't know, you know, what's after football for me, you know, future opportunities, but like I said, I just feel blessed. I feel grateful for this team and the season and run we had, the ISU community, city of Bloomington-Normal. It's a real special place, and I wouldn't trade my experience for the world.

**Q. Coach, on that blocked field goal there at the end of the game, did you see anything on that? Can you just talk about what you saw?**

BROCK SPACK: It looked like there was a ball handling issue on both of them, but it's hard to say without watching the tape. But it looked like there was a little bit of ball handling and the ball was a little flat, and the ball didn't get



up. And that's one thing.

That's why we made the change for place kicking, because Mike can get the ball up pretty well, but I think there might have been a little ball handling. I don't want to point the blame at anybody without watching tape, but it looked like there was a little bit of a ball handling issue on both of them.

**Q. Tye, can you talk about the adjustments you guys made defensively in the second half. Montana State was rolling, and you guys were able to hold them in check pretty well the last two quarters.**

TYE NIEKAMP: Yeah, I mean, I don't know if we made a crazy amount of adjustments. The big thing for us is we weren't tackling very well at all. We kind of weren't playing up to our level that we thought we could play. I mean, you kind of saw in the last drive of the first half, there was a lot of missed tackles that let them score.

In the second half we tackled a lot better, and that was the reason we played a lot better in the second half. There wasn't really a crazy amount of adjustments. I think the only thing really adjusted was bringing a lot of pressure on third down, because we were getting home.

**Q. Tye, can you describe the emotions of such a dramatic game that went bad?**

TYE NIEKAMP: I mean, heartbroken, honestly. The worst part is going back in the locker room and seeing the seniors. It's awful, honestly.

Every year sucks, but it gets worse and worse every year, because you know the guys more and more. Then not to finish the goal and go back in there and see those guys, it breaks your heart. So it's tough. It's tough.

**Q. I don't know if you saw or heard the attendance. I guess they said it was the largest attendance since 1996. Well, what do you think contributes to that kind of support for football teams?**

TOMMY RITTENHOUSE: Yeah, I mean, it's great support. That was a classic football game right there. Yeah, I mean, I had a blast no matter win or lose.

TYE NIEKAMP: Yeah, it was an electric atmosphere for sure. It's probably the most fun I've had playing in a game, so...

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and release our student-athletes. Gentlemen, terrific year this year. Congratulations.

We'll open it up now for questions for Coach Spack.

**Q. Is it disappointing to have back-to-back kicks go that way, yet you had the field goal, but then the PAT with a chance to kind of put some pressure on Montana State and to have both of those kind of go that way, was that disappointing?**

BROCK SPACK: Yeah, obviously. We spent a lot of times on special teams, but there are no gimmies. You have to execute, and we didn't. So that's just I guess part of sport.

Yeah, it's very disappointing.

**Q. Did you think you were going to win the game when you lined up for the field goal?**

BROCK SPACK: I did. I thought it was the right decision at the time. We went back and forth about going on fourth down, but we cut a guy loose on the play before, and we kind of got beat pretty bad on the line of scrimmage. I thought, you know, we're in field goal range. This is well into Mike's range. He gets the ball up. I think we would be fine. Didn't happen that way.

Yeah, I thought we could win the game there.

**Q. Tye talked about just the pressure you guys were able to bring in the second half. How much do you think that contributed to you going on your 20-point run?**

BROCK SPACK: I think it was part of it. Particularly on third down, we were trying to take -- as you all saw in the first half, the quarterback is a really good athlete. And we knew that coming in. I was even more impressed to watch him live.

We wanted to take all the run lanes away from him and try to get the ball out fast and try to put color on the receivers. Sometimes it worked really well, and the last touchdown didn't. You know, we got beat on kind of a big box fade. You know, it's kind of the nemesis or the negative towards zero coverage, because you got to get there. Just a step or two too late.

**Q. Can you take us through what belief you saw from your team through this playoff run to kind of feel like you could beat anybody anywhere and what you saw from them in that regard?**

BROCK SPACK: Your statement is exactly what we saw. You know, I think our team believed they could beat anybody anywhere. Particularly how we played at North



Dakota State. As you all know, it's a very, very good program, and went on the road there, and to overcome five turnovers to win a game like that there was impressive.

Just really proud of the team. I had a feeling that we could -- if we could just get a stop on the first series the second half, that we would have a chance, and we did. That was big. It gave us some confidence, and we were able to battle back, and we took the lead, but lost it there in the end.

I was very confident we would play well.

**Q. What do you think was working for your offense that you were able to keep chipping away at their lead?**

BROCK SPACK: I'm sorry. The first part of your question was?

**Q. What was working for your offense to keep being able to chip away at their lead?**

BROCK SPACK: I think Tommy kind of settled down a little bit. He had some guys open in the first half, and he missed them, but I think he settled down and played a lot better in the second half.

We converted on third down, and we had -- our running game was pretty good. It was efficient. We were able to keep Montana State off balance, I believe, with how we were attacking them with our run and throw.

But again, I think his accuracy and his ability to find receivers in the second half was -- that was what the adjustment was for offense. Just we had some guys open. We went back to some things we saw on the iPads, and we took advantage of it in the second half.

**Q. Can you talk about the fourth down where you targeted Sobkowicz in the end zone and he scored and how much momentum that was able to give you guys?**

BROCK SPACK: Well, he's our best player. Being a defensive coach all my life, you always want to know who the touchdown makers are. And they did -- the way they were defending Daniel in the first half, they were pressing with a corner with a safety over the top. They weren't going to allow him to run by them. It freed up some other guys.

You saw 4 had a great game for us today. He's a great competitor. That's going to be a really good football player. He's already a good football player. He's really young and came off a broken leg last year as a freshman. He's a walk-on player. Not anymore, but he was when he came.

I think they had to kind of balance their coverage up a little bit, and that gave us some room to run a double move with Daniel down there in the red zone.

**Q. Can you take us through just to what extent the preparation was like in trying to defend and figure out where Taco Dowler was and how that transitioned to seeing him in person today?**

BROCK SPACK: Yeah, we go way back with the Dowler family in Laramie. Joe Dowler, the grandfather, was a guy I knew when I was there as a coordinator. He's a great guy.

He's a handful. He's another guy. We knew he was good on tape, but he's even better in person. He made us miss a few times in the first half. We had very poor tackling, and I look back -- if I look back, a key drive in the game was the score right before half I thought. They had three big chunk plays, and it was bang, bang, bang, touchdown.

We didn't tackle very well. We didn't vice tackle very well. And that was something that shouldn't have happened that did. So that's what I told the team in there. It's hard for them to understand that right now that it all comes down to one play. Well, it wasn't the field goal. It wasn't the extra point. There was a lot of things that could have happened in that game. If you make one of those plays, you win a game like this. I think they'll see that someday, I hope. It's hard to tell them that right now.

But he's a very good player. We tried to punt away from him in the punting game, tried to punt the ball close to the sidelines as we could get, because our punter has been very good at directional punting. We just didn't want him to beat us, but he played really well. Particularly in the first half.

We couldn't tackle him. That was the key to the first half. We couldn't get Dowler on the ground, and the others -- he's not the only one. But just didn't push the ball down the field. They haven't done that all year. They had a lot of meshes, a lot of control passing game. They dump the ball to the receiver and let him run, and they do a good job of it.

Appreciate everything everybody has done. This is a great venue. Thanks.

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