

Division I Football Championship: Montana State vs Illinois State

Monday, January 5, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

FirstBank Stadium

Montana State Bobcats
Coach Brent Vigen

Justin Lamson

Taco Dowler

Postgame Press Conference



Nashville here and take over, that was certainly impactful tonight.

Long time coming. 41 years in the making. Our fourth national championship as a football program. I couldn't be more proud of our players. That's what you keep coming back to, because players win games.

When you're in fourth and long and you need a play like those two made, and that's just one play, but these two guys that are going to come up here, those guys are the stars. Just excited to get this done.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. The way the offense struggled, I think a lot of us were wondering how it was going to happen, and maybe you can talk about whether that special teams play was something you had in your pocket? Talk about what Jhase did, special teams, preparation, coaching?

BRENT VIGEN: Yeah. The unscripted piece was the penalties tonight. We made it really hard on ourselves, because I think we offensively, you know, showed flashes, but it was one step forward and sometimes two steps back.

The momentum clearly had shifted, so much so that they got the ball in their hands with a chance. I think, again, that belief comes into play. Jhase knows it's overload block. He knows he's got to get a good jump and get off the edge, and I know the snap hit the ground. Ultimately Jhase is probably our fastest guy. He found a way to get hands on it. Then we turned around and gave ourselves another chance on offense, and we can't figure that out.

Just part of the story tonight.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to pause on questions for coach, as we have our student-athletes here. Congratulations on the national championship. Let's open it up for questions for Justin and Taco.

Q. Justin, can you just talk us through the fourth and

Montana State 35, Illinois State 34

THE MODERATOR: The players will be our most outstanding player, Justin Lamson, and Taco Dowler, but joining us is a very happy head coach, and after a long time, national champions, Coach Brent Vigen.

Coach, make an opening comment for us. Congratulations.

BRENT VIGEN: What a hard-fought game. These things aren't supposed to come easily, I guess. The first thing I want to do is certainly credit Coach Spack and that team.

Knew their track record and knew they wouldn't go away, and we maybe had some moments in that second half where we can extend that lead, and we just didn't do it. So a lot of credit goes to them.

But a ton of credit goes to our players and our staff, for all that we've done since sitting up on this same podium -- not the same exact podium, but the one in Frisco a year ago.

And that belief that maybe pulled us through doesn't come easy. Our players and their constant work and their constant wanting to be coached, I can't say enough about just their mindset. Putting a new coaching staff together, that group coming together and figuring it out and continuing to find ways to put our guys in the best position on Saturdays, and in this case a Monday.

Then I certainly want to give tons of credit to Bobcat Nation. That was a scene, and we've had some scenes back home, but to really take our fan base down to



11 play and what you guys talked about on the sideline, I guess, before the play and just how it played out?

JUSTIN LAMSON: Yeah, so we had a play called. They called a time-out. Coach Sterbick liked what he saw, and I believe it was the second play of that drive. It's a play we call flag banger, an inside-out read.

I think the first one, a little bit behind Bez, he couldn't catch it, but Taco won on the corner. So he came back to it. That's just good stuff out of a really good OC.

Yeah, and Taco is wide open. I got hit, so I just kind of gave him a chance, and the rest is history. Myles did his thing and won us the game.

It was a great play call. Taco and I were just doing what we were supposed to do and what we were taught to do.

Q. Taco, you think a lot of people are going to start asking about the name now after a performance like tonight? Do you kind of welcome that with a championship?

TACO DOWLER: I hope not. I hope they don't ask me about the name, Taco.

Q. Why?

TACO DOWLER: I don't know. It's silly, don't you think? I don't know. It's simple like that.

Q. Taco, can you just take us through what it took for this team to get here and just the run you guys have been on and what it's like to just culminate here tonight with a national championship?

TACO DOWLER: Yeah, that's a really good question. If you followed our season, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. It was rocky at times.

Sticking to our roots and sticking to blue collar mentality and breathing. Coach Herrin does a really good job of taking us through breathing exercising to be calm. From top down, good men in this program. And I think that that's a -- the game today is a testament to the good men in the program.

Yeah, no, I couldn't be prouder of the guys.

Q. Taco, just to do this with Caden, how special was that? What were the conversations like after the game as well?

TACO DOWLER: Yeah, really special. Yeah, it was just really special.

Q. Justin and Taco, a lot of big plays by wide receivers in this game on your side. Can you just take me through kind of the performances that you have seen from all your teammates to help move the ball as well as you did?

JUSTIN LAMSON: You know, these last couple of games we've been stressing who is going to be the spark, who is going to be the spark. I think we have so many weapons on our team. Ultimately, it really comes down to doing our 111th. Every guy was getting open. I don't think there was a lot of MAs, and that's really what it is. It's just being well-coached and guys doing what they need to do to make plays.

There was a lot of guys that came up and were the spark tonight, so I'm just happy for those guys. It's a great group of guys that work really hard day in and day out, whether it's offseason or in the season.

Yeah, I mean, didn't expect much less from that group.

TACO DOWLER: Yeah, talking about the wideouts, I think that at halftime I told them that this is the difference this year is the wideouts.

Really proud of those guys. We work really hard. Coach Mix is a great coach, but look who is sitting next to me right now. Both of them. It's easy to play receiver when Justin is your quarterback and putting the ball right on your chest, and it's easy when you're game planned open and Coach Sterbick is making really good calls, and it's easy when you have confidence in your teammates. That's instilled from Coach Mix. He does a great job of that.

Q. Justin, when you arrived here in Bozeman for your first season here with the Bobcats, did you dream of this moment? If you did, did the dream live up to the hype and the billing?

JUSTIN LAMSON: I think you always dream with winning a National Championship, and I really think that's become the standard at Montana State. We lost a lot of guys, and that's kind of all I heard going into the season.

But when I got here, I already knew that we had dudes, like guys that not a lot of people were talking about. I got here late, and these guys accepted me. Coach Vigen took a chance on me when not a lot of other people did, kept pursuing me.

Yeah, I mean, I thought about this moment. Just to be



here is a little bit different, you know what I mean? You think it's going to happen, and now it's really happening. I'm just trying to take it all in.

I'm so thankful I got my chance at Montana State. Yeah, I'm blessed.

Q. Justin, you could barely miss in the first half. What were you seeing so well early in the game? What adjustments did Illinois State show you as the game progressed?

JUSTIN LAMSON: Yeah, I thought we got into a really good flow. I was seeing it really well. We prepared really hard for this game, so I do think that's a factor.

No, but it was a combination of everybody in their 111th. That's what we talk about. I'm just following my reads, following what the coaches are telling me to do.

Illinois State, they brought it in the second half. It wasn't anything of what they were doing. I do feel like we were shooting ourselves in the foot a little bit. They were holding onto the ball for a while, so it was hard to get in that rhythm.

There was a lot of stuff there. We just kind of shot ourselves in the foot sometimes.

Q. Justin, maybe you can talk about the mood on the team. Illinois State has the ball at the end. There's a minute left. Jhase make the field goal block, and then you get another PAT block. Something had to happen somewhere, and that's where it happened. Can you talk about those guys and what they did for you?

JUSTIN LAMSON: They got us back in the game. The sideline, myself included, we understood we were going to have to go have a one-minute drive with one time-out, and that's not easy to do.

Them just sending that to overtime, like we say on offense, who is going to make the spark? And it was the defensive guys that did that, and they're a huge reason why they won the game.

We have dudes all over the field making plays. That's what Montana State football is.

Q. Justin, what was your reaction to some of the sparks in the second quarter, like Dane's hurdle for a touchdown and then Taco diving into the end zone? What are your reactions as a quarterback to those plays?

JUSTIN LAMSON: Yeah, it's guys making plays. That's Dane Steel. Not a lot of people talk about him, as they should. Taco and I were kind of hyping him up. We're not going to hype him up too much, but we were just saying that people got to think about Dane.

Taco gets a lot of receptions, but Dane is a dude that works day in and day out and really stepped up this year. Taco with that touchdown, jumping, I was happy he didn't get a flag, but --

TACO DOWLER: Me, too.

JUSTIN LAMSON: That was just Taco -- yeah, exactly. We might get plate pushes for that, but that's just Taco making a play, doing what he does, getting him the ball in space, and I thought we did a really good job of that.

No, those two dudes are dogs, and so happy that they're on our side.

Q. There was the player reunion. You got to see Bobcats from all different eras. Does that impact the way you think about the history of Montana State? What's it like being a part of that history?

TACO DOWLER: Yeah, I think we've said it a lot now, that we're standing on the shoulders of Giants, and we really are. We would not be where we're at without the alumni, without the donors, without all of them.

It means the world to see a family and a culture that was built so long ago, and there's so much love in that indoor. There was so much love in that indoor. We could have been there for five hours if we wanted to be.

That's what this means so much for is for the alumni and for the people that came before us. So I couldn't be happier and more proud to bring this championship to them along with my brothers here.

JUSTIN LAMSON: Yeah, I think it's safe to say that they're a huge reason why we're here. Just the support, I mean, there's a lot of dudes that have come through this program and set the standard. Then coach Vigen comes in and continues that standard, and we're just trying to follow it. You know what I mean?

"Bobcat built," that's what we go by. All those dudes represent that. Thankful I'm part of this family, and yeah.

Q. Justin, just on the stage after the game shouting out how much it meant to bring the trophy back to Bozeman. What has this community meant to you over the last year? How does it feel to put your name



on a list with very few people in program history?

JUSTIN LAMSON: Yeah, they just keep surprising me. You know what I mean? We had the Super Bowl last week. I didn't think they could top that. We almost filled out all of Vandy Stadium.

I continue to say that it takes an army. It takes a lot of people behind us. It's not just the players. It's the alumni. It's the town. I'm sure Coach Vigen will touch on this. It's all these people that are coming together to support us.

The reason I said that is just because it hasn't happened in 41 years, but people laid the foundation for us. They continue to support us throughout those 41 years. I'm just thankful that we were the group, I guess, to bring it back to Bozeman, so yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much. Congratulations on the National Championship. We'll continue.

Q. On Saturday in your press conference you talked about accomplishing the mission, mission accomplished. Just being on that stage hoisting that trophy, how did it feel to celebrate with this group of guys, and how will you celebrate this victory?

BRENT VIGEN: I think it's hard to put into words. You can think about it all you want with how you're going to feel and what you're going to say and all that stuff. Then it happens, and you know, you look out there, and the field is full, and the stands still seem full. You're just so grateful to be at a place that is so well-supported and has so many people that care.

When you can truly say, yes, the players and coaches are champions, but all the Bobcats are champions. To be able to clear that hurdle and know that, yes, this '25 group accomplished what hadn't been done in a long time, but we're building for more.

That's kind of where as a coach your mind goes pretty dang quick. In this day and age it is complicated. The support that we get -- we've got a young team. We had nine seniors. It's my hope that support keeps coming and we can keep this group together and run it back next year.

Q. You talk about the community. You talk about the players. You talk about everybody who contributed to this, but for you as a coach personally, what does this mean for you to get that first one?

BRENT VIGEN: Well, I think being part of three championships as an assistant, your role is different.

You're still a piece of it, but getting the program to this point and allowing guys to do their job, and that's players and coaches, and getting a chance to work with the administration that we have. I see President Cruzado out there, President Tessman, obviously Leon.

I don't know. You think about getting this opportunity and having people believe in you and the amazing support that I feel like our family has gotten. Obviously Molly is sitting there, and how much this community has embraced her and our boys. At the same time, I think the efforts that she's put in to love it back. You think about so many things.

It isn't just me, clearly. It's so many people. It's people believing in you and believing in what you see and how you want to continue to move a program forward. You feel like you can maybe exhale a little bit, but right back to work, I'm sure.

Q. Those two guys that were sitting next to you made so many big plays all year, but particularly down the stretch in the playoffs. They have basically the National Championship winning connection. Can you just talk about how clutch those two guys were for you, especially the last month or so?

BRENT VIGEN: Yeah, players win games. Players win championships. Coaches certainly guide them, put them in position, hopefully bring them along and build that belief, but we've got a bunch of guys like that that can play this game.

I know the challenges to coaching is to continue to find ways to put them in that position. And that example, that fourth down play, like he said, we called the same play a couple of plays before that in maybe a little different formation, a little different presentation, but Coach Sterbick saw Taco can win.

And when he called the same play again that he just ran two plays ago -- but that was the piece we were looking for, Justin Lamson to Taco Dowler. I was all for it.

In those moments as a coach, trusting your players and allowing them to go make plays, is really what this is all about.

Couldn't be more happy for those two. Yeah, it's pretty dang fitting it was those two making that connection.

Q. What led to the decision, or maybe it's a series of independent decisions as the game goes on, just to put the ball in your quarterback's hands so much today, and how do you think he handled that on a day

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

where you didn't really lean on the running backs that much?

BRENT VIGEN: Yeah, what a -- I say this is an odd game. It's an odd game for us, but for them this is kind of the script. I know we didn't have the turnovers North Dakota State had, but as far as the advantage in plays and the advantage in time possession, there is some similarity there.

I say that because our offensive opportunities were less than we usually would maybe like to have. There's credit that goes to Illinois State for being able to limit those and then force us to punt a few times. I'm looking at this right here. 14 penalties for 93 yards. To overcome that.

Just a strange game where you don't turn the ball over, but you are at that huge disadvantage as far as the way it worked. We had more big plays than them at the same time. The score before the half was kind of ridiculous to score in three plays.

I don't know. I think the way we played offense this year -- long answer here, sorry. The way we played offense I think is an adjustment to our -- we need to throw the ball. Rushing for 300 yards is a way to do it, but getting us over the hump, you know, needed a little bit more and needed to throw the ball. That's maybe how I should have answered the question from the start.

Q. You made some time during the celebration to run over and talk to Tommy Rittenhouse. And I'm interested, can you share why that was important to you? Also, just the challenge of fending off Illinois State tonight.

BRENT VIGEN: Well, I caught a glimpse of him. We've been on that side of the coin. You just appreciate the type of competitor that he is and was tonight. That was not a flash tonight. That's what we've seen on film.

You appreciate guys that can compete, and they do everything they can for your team, and I caught him, and I wanted to tell him just that.

Q. The three big plays at the end of the game, the blocked extra point and all that, it was such a roller coaster ride. The fans, the media, everybody in the stadium was just going, what's going on? I was just thinking, what were you kind of feeling through all of that?

BRENT VIGEN: Well, we're still alive. I know that much. Yeah, and we pick up that ball, and we get face masked, and that's one way to tackle a guy, I guess. It's just

declined. An automatic decline. Didn't know that rule.

If tonight did not reinforce this group's "never say die" attitude, I don't know what will. That's not easy to come by. The great thing about this team -- and I think it ultimately is what does push us over is the main thing -- we talked about keep the main thing the main thing going into this game, and that is just us playing trying to play as one. We are our best when we play as one. To do that you need to trust one another. You need to believe. This team found a way to have a little bit more than the other team tonight.

Q. Last year you were talking about how you need to learn another lesson, don't really know why you had the Bison block the year before with the same score in this game, almost the exact same overtime. How much do you reflect on those moments to be able to get to where you are today?

BRENT VIGEN: Well, I think each team is different. You try to pull something from each year into the next. I think this team you could tell had different seeds to it. It just did from the start.

I say that, what were those lessons? It's probably just building a team in its own image, and the youth we had in this group had to figure it out, figure out those opportunities and go after them. The leadership that was new had to figure it out.

We went to work at those things that aren't weight room. They're not on the field. They're between the ears. You know, going back to the end of January last year.

So I just appreciate the pain that those players went through last year, those seniors. You feel so bad for them that it didn't work out on that night, but they're a big piece to why we were able to I think get over the hump. We need to keep learning.

I know you can never think you have it all figured out, but it's good to take a little bit of an exhale tonight.

Q. You talked earlier this season about wanting to be challenged, and tonight you mentioned the penalties and them being able to cut the deficit. How were you able to maybe rely on some of the past experience in games like this, even this season, to kind of come out on top tonight?

BRENT VIGEN: Well, just next play. A big huge part was our defense finding a way to get Tim the fourth down. We had used two time-outs. Putting him in that position where they had to kick there, and they didn't get any closer.

I think the defense tonight was on the field way too much, and part of our defense's doing, part of our offense's doing, but that group keeps battling. Our offense ultimately was able to answer on a number of occasions, too, and special teams, I think we clearly won that battle tonight.

I don't even know if I answered your question there, but so many factors, so many things that led to it. It's just continued belief and a sense that we'll find a way.

I think back to that double overtime loss against South Dakota State. I don't know. I don't know if we had quite the same belief tonight. Really that night galvanized us a little bit. Maybe losing that night contributed to us figuring out tonight.

Q. About a month ago you expressed your commitment to this program, and I'm curious when you have received attention and garnered interest from elsewhere, I'm curious what is it like for you in that moment to value sticking through with this program, and how important was it to you then, and how valuable is it to you now?

BRENT VIGEN: Wow. You know what, the month of December and even now into January has become the land of one season converging with the next. Whether it's opportunities for coaches or opportunities for players, there's no waiting for that, I guess.

I know for Molly and I and our family, the decision to move forward not only with this team, but with this football program is reflective of the support we get, how much we love Bozeman, how much we love Montana. I don't know that this is the reward by any means, but being committed to something in this day and age is, I don't know, fleeting.

Seeing the commitment from -- I guess, from me as a coach, I hope that our players see that, respect that. Making decisions in this is day and age aren't easy. There's a lot of factors that go into it, but for us as a family, to be at a place that you have the support we have to live the life we have, to have an administration that supports you, a fan base that supports you, it's hard to top all that.

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