

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship - Final Four: Illinois vs UConn

Thursday, April 2, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Brad Underwood

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, it's great to be here. It's been nine years of dreaming a big dream since I took the Illinois job. A lot of people to thank along that. I'd be very remiss if I tried to mentioned them all and I would miss somebody.

But I'm excited that this group of guys gets to experience this opportunity. We know that we've got a great, great opponent in UConn, a team that we saw earlier in the year. I'm very, very grateful for Danny, sending a tweet out earlier in the year after I congratulated him on a win and him being able to foresee that we'd both be here in Indy.

Excited for our fans. Excited for our university. It's an incredible opportunity. Looking forward to seeing all the orange and blue in Lucas Oil on Saturday night and looking forward to the challenge of playing a great, great UConn team and obviously one that is very, very tough and has no quit in them.

We're excited to be here.

Q. You're familiar with this city, obviously playing here in the Big Ten, but the last time you were here for the NCAA Tournament was a bit of a strange experience. Just what do you remember about that tournament, that season and just how it built into, I imagine, a tournament everyone was curious to live once but doesn't ever have to do again?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I would agree with that. I think it's the last time I've been back in this building. It was the second time in the year we did play in front of a few fans.

Obviously this building was constructed a little bit differently for the Big Ten Tournament. Most of my memories on the basketball side are pretty positive. The other stuff wasn't. We never went outside. The day we were to go to the baseball field it rained. Then the

uniqueness of having to go to -- being quarantined and never really being able to celebrate that, that Big Ten victory, was all a unique experience.

Always excited to be back here. Indianapolis is a great, great host. It's one of the best Final Four cities ever in my opinion, and looking forward to being here.

Q. In the busyness and noise of this week, have you been able to take a moment on how long it's been and how hard you've worked, and does it make it more meaningful because you've waited so long for this moment?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think it was fun after winning the region to sit back and just think a little bit. I hope to get to do that in the future after all of this is over.

I think one of the really neat things for me has been all the stops along the way. Some of the people that have reached out and the old friends and the old acquaintances and the people that are coming from all those stops has just been -- it means a lot to me.

I say it all the time, I hope I'm not known for wins and losses. I hope I'm known for impacting some lives of people and creating memories. That's come to fruition a little bit with some of the texts and phone calls I've gotten here in the last few days.

Q. Obviously a lot has been made of how well you guys have recruited the Europeans. What did it take for you to sort of establish that pipeline, those relationships, some of the legwork that you had to put in?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, I've always loved them. I've had them. My story back when I was at Western Illinois back when I was recruiting internationally, Orlando Antigua on our staff obviously has got tremendous international connections. We've had him early at Illinois from all over, and that's just continued.

NIL has helped open some of those doors, and when

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Orlando left and Geoff Alexander basically took over, the Euro market was something we were interested in. We knew we needed positional size. We knew we were recruiting shooting. They do it as well as anybody in the world in my opinion.

Geoff has spent many, many trips going over there, developing relationships, and now Orlando comes back and we've just invested heavily in doing that. We believe in it.

Q. Some of the guys in the locker room said that Jake Davis has become kind of an honorary Balkan. What makes him fit with those guys and how did he earn that honor?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You've probably got to be a little bit crazy, which Jake probably is. I think he's gone out of his way to make those guys feel at home. I think he's brought them back here to Indiana with them in the summer, and on off weekends they hang out a lot. I think they've got similar things in common personally.

Jake is our leader. Everybody likes Jake. Great teammate, and he's also a little bit confrontational. He's not afraid to get on those guys. But he's probably, as much as anybody, helped in ways that maybe they needed help in terms of the American ways and basketball and me and our program become more comfortable.

He's very much engrained with those guys.

Q. The European players, they play pro ball over there. Could you explain the difference between that kind of pro ball and the kind of pro ball that would be like the G-League or something that's kind of under the microscope here about whether those players should be able to play in college?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, theirs are just clubs. People forget, our guys are young guys. Mihailo is the oldest, but Dave Mirkovic just turned 19.

The one thing that I think we can't lose sight of is high school kids are getting NIL now. We're getting it in college. They don't have an opportunity to play at the university level. They're put into a system that allows them to play at the club level and on their junior teams and develop, and I think that's the main difference.

But I'd argue in today's world we're all -- all these kids are finding opportunities that allow them to receive compensation.

Q. How different did it hit when you got to the hotel,

the locker room, to see that Illinois plastered everywhere, the Final Four, walking on the court, and is it helpful to have this day to get some of the emotions and narrow your focus on UConn for Saturday?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, and my hats off to the NCAA. This is incredible. This is impressive, what they do in the hotels for the student-athletes. You've got blankets on your bed and pillowcases and the game rooms to help all of them, and the team rooms.

And then you walk in here, and you've got your team picture plastered in your locker room and all the individual photos, and just the hallways, it makes it feel very, very special.

You're always going to feel that when you walk on the court and you're in a football stadium that seats a lot more people than we play in front of. It was really neat just to see the kind of giddy smiling faces of a group of guys that worked really hard to get here and experience that.

But yeah, it helps having a day today, and you kind of knock it all out and get a feel for it and understanding that it is a little bit different. But it's still business as usual, and we're going to conduct it that way.

Q. You've done countless interviews the last couple days nationally. What does this platform mean for your program to spread it nationally?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think it's just -- I think it goes beyond the program. I think it's the university. I think it's the State of Illinois. I think it's Champaign-Urbana. I think it's continued next-step development is the way I look at it.

We play in a lot of big games. We play a great schedule. We play on national television every single night. But not to this level.

You've just got to keep knocking on the door and keep finding ways to improve, and to me this is a step that allows us to improve, and along the way it brings great memories, and it helps our university and brings it at the forefront. I'm excited about that.

Q. Kylan has been pretty open about they had a lot of scrutiny off the court at Arizona. What's his evolution been at Illinois and going home, which can be a distraction I know sometimes?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think going home has helped. I think that a place that Kyle was so beloved, I think so many friends and family, and everybody says, well,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

sometimes that can be a distraction. I think it's just been a source of comfort for him. Mom, dad, grandparents, everybody is right there.

I think that our fans have great appreciation for one of their own. And then the way he's handled himself has been -- he's just been elite. He's been a joy to coach. He's been unselfish. He's been a guy that is all about winning.

When I think of Kylan, I think of those things. He's been a great teammate to everybody.

He's as much a part of this success, and it's pretty unusual to do it from your hometown.

Q. How would you describe the dynamic between the Ivistic twins and how have you seen them play together this season?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, that's one of the things that in all honesty, we probably talked to Tommy a lot about when it became available that Z could come. Tommy, obviously, was all in. He wanted to play with his brother. He was excited about it. Z was all on board with that.

There were some challenges early because of Tommy's tonsillitis. He hurts his knee. Those were kind of in the formative times of practice where Tommy missed a lot of them. So we started out having to alternate those guys a lot, more because of Tommy's conditioning and his just missed time.

Their chemistry is unbelievable. Their competitiveness is unbelievable. They go at each other all the time. They're very different people, even though they're twins, and yet their synergy is really fun to see.

I think there's -- I think for lack of a better word, those two set the tone for the other guys from over there. And just their comfort of being in the States, even though Z wasn't with us the whole time, they've helped ease some of the transition and the challenges that lie for the others.

Great people, great personalities, and been an incredible, incredible group to coach.

Q. Brad, I wanted to ask you about Andrej. He's obviously had great games all the way through the year, but in terms of production, the consistency hasn't been there, but over the last three weeks in the tournament he's been phenomenal in big moments. Can you sort of explain what's opened up for him over that period of time and why it's working so well?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I'm going to start with the

obvious. His health. The ankle injury, and he's had multiple ankle sprains this year, but the last one was a doozy.

I think incorporating him back in took a little bit of time. When you've got an ankle injury you're going to lose conditioning. You're not able to do much.

But I think he's as healthy as he's been. I also think he's one of the great listeners, and I mean that in a positive way. We missed seven weeks with him. The first day of school he hurts his knee, misses seven weeks and misses all those really times that I wanted to coach him hard and demand him in practice and get him right and get his mentality right.

But the one thing he's done is he's accepted defending. He's accepted rebounding. We all know his offense can come and that he's a very capable guy there.

But now he has just adjusted. I couldn't have asked for anything more coming off the bench. He's done that in a way that has helped us grow and play our best basketball.

I think he likes the comfort of seeing the game for a few minutes and knowing where his opportunities are when he comes in.

Q. Brad, the last time you played UConn in the tournament was the Elite Eight game in Boston, the 30-0 run, but since that night --

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Thanks for the reminder, by the way.

Q. Since that night, what's been the most satisfying part for you with how this program has rebuilt and grown and gone on to this platform now?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's just that, and I don't think we've rebuilt, I think we just reload. It's looked different. I've said all along, you just have to keep knocking on the door and our opportunities were going to come.

We learned a lot from that game. I thought that team was a Final Four team that just happened to play a damn good basketball team in the Elite Eight, so we didn't get there.

But I think we grew from that from the standpoint of understanding how hard it is, what that looks like. But yeah, it's hard to argue with what Danny has done throughout his time there and the consistency, and that's the one thing we've tried to match is the consistency and not ever look at it as a rebuild but just a reload.



Q. You talked about Western Illinois and the international flavor. You had the '99/2000 team, Fernando Coloneze, Juan Martinez. Where did you find those guys and what was it about them that made you feel you should recruit more guys like that?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, they were really good, really skilled player. Juan Martinez was a really good player and Fernando was huge. Those guys were guys that actually came to the States. Juan played at Quincy High School and Fernando went a year of junior college.

Times were different there in terms of academics and what those opportunities looked like, but they both had great, great careers. Again, it was a way for us to go find positional size, and Fernando was 6'11", 260, and Juan was a very, very skilled 6'8", 6'9" just tough, physical athlete.

We won a lot of games with those guys.

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