

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

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

UConn Huskies

Coach Dan Hurley

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



DAN HURLEY: Thrilled to be here in Indianapolis. Just landing, the hospitality, obviously the Hoosier state, it doesn't feel like there's many better places to play a Final Four.

It's one of the truly great places that you get to play it, and for me, I was here for the magical Duke/UNLV game for the Final Four. It's cool to be back here for a non-COVID Final Four.

Q. The last two titles that you had coming into the Final Four, everyone sort of knew UConn was the team to beat and you were the heavy favorites. This year it's a little bit different. Does that change at all your approach to this tournament, what you're telling your guys going into it? Or is it pretty much the same?

DAN HURLEY: I think the mentality is just pretty much the same. It's not a situation where there's, like, more pressure or less pressure, you're the favorite, you're considered the fourth favorite.

For us, you're just so dialed into how you prepare for games at this point. Everything is so programmed. Everything is so automated: the practices, the drills, the techniques, the fundamentals.

We know the things that we have to do, the things that have caused us to not be the efficient team that we've wanted to be throughout the year, whether it's been turnovers at the offensive end, not always being on the offensive glass, obviously some shooting struggles from three.

But what doesn't get measured when you're dealing with teams and efficiencies is the ability to -- the will, the fight, a team's refusal to lose games. That doesn't get factored in, obviously, to the analytics.

Q. You referenced it there, this is the first Final Four here since 2021, which is obviously a weird experience for everyone. I'm curious what you remember from that experience, just the process of the bubble essentially? I know everybody had to stay inside most of the time. I think teams were given a little bit of outside time --

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, we got let loose in the yard.

Q. Did you get to go to the baseball stadium?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, and all the teams were circling each other. It was bizarre. Listen, everyone from that -- if you did great in that tournament, you deserve all the credit. If it went bad for you, and I'm not just saying that because it went bad for us, but you should get a pass. That was a mess. They were literally knocking on your door and dropping the food at your door. It wasn't slop, but it was -- maybe it was.

Yeah, the whole year was just a -- this whole season was a tough season. We were lucky just to be able to get a tournament in and do those things.

I guess I brought it up and then that led to that question, but now I'm, like, jarred mentally up here. That was horrible. We had to play at Purdue. It was a long ride. I wanted to play at Butler, but I don't get to decide where you get to play because we win at Butler, but -- I'm done.

Q. When Silas went into the portal, what attracted you to him, and how does a guy that big and that versatile slip through the recruiting process the first time around?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, with Silas, again, I don't remember seeing him as a high school player. I think a lot of head coaches in recruiting, you go where the assistants send you. They kind of filter who you get a chance to put your eyes on.

Then just knowing the vulnerabilities, the issues that we

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had with our '25 team, that we needed size at point guard, we needed a ball hawk at point guard, we needed somebody that had some of the same traits as Tristen Newton at point guard, just the versatility, the three-way player, he rebounds, he plays both ends of the court.

Then the other thing is we needed a warrior. We needed a guy that had tremendous will and a fighter and a warrior, and I think you've seen that in the NCAA Tournament. This guy played at probably 65 percent the first weekend versus UCLA. He probably got to 75 percent in the Sweet 16/Elite Eight game, and I think he's much better this week.

I think he's got a chance to play at like 90 percent physically for the Illinois game, which we're going to need all of that.

Q. I know that you've commented on the thing with Roger Ayers and you've talked about it. Are you surprised the amount of attention that that's gotten? I was also curious as a follow on that, what is your general approach to dealing with officials during games?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, surprised now? Obviously the reaction, the outrage, I don't -- I guess I just look at it a lot differently. I think we all do, and I think that's what, I guess, makes social media so appealing to people, is that you can have the discourse and different opinions about how somebody carries themselves in -- for you it's a game. For some people we're just out there playing a game. For me it's a life-or-death battle. It's a war. It's a street fight for me.

However you look at sports or people on social media that comment on how the combatants carry themselves, that's not really for me to judge. I approach sports as a competitor the way that I do. My responsibility is to win games and obviously do a great job for my players. Those are really the only two things I'm concerned with.

All that other stuff, it comes with the territory, and a lot of it comes with the success. The winning back to back championships, you put yourself in a position where you're going to be picked apart.

Then dealing with the officials, I think I'm an intense coach. It's not easy to work my games. But I've always gotten zero technical fouls in my NCAA Tournament coaching career. I just jinxed myself. Oh, my God, now I'm going to get bounced out of this thing. Oh, my God.

Getting walked out of a stadium, long walk. (Smiling).

Q. You kind of half answered my question about Silas

but giving me percentages of what he is. What does it say about him as a person and a player?

DAN HURLEY: I think the family he comes from. I think the thing that we've gotten right the best is just the families around the players. We get players that come from great -- they're just great pedigree. He's got an incredible family and support system, and he's got a dad who's a former football player.

You get a football player's mentality in a basketball player, they're going to play with that ankle. There's so much attention, obviously, and rightfully so, the play by Braylon, the deflection by Silas, the fight in the team, but really those threes that he hit in the second half, like that to me was -- there's no anything after that without those three-point shots going in when there was a lid on the bucket.

Q. I feel like after the New Mexico State loss in the tournament you talked about the importance of Andre and Jordan Hawkins and their leadership and how they helped shape the program. I'm curious what you leaned on from the returners with this group and what April and May look like in terms of reestablishing the culture that you guys want to create.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, you lose so many players. That two-year stretch, the Donovan Clingans, the Steph Castles, the Jordan Hawkins, the Cam Spencers. At some point there's going to be a void or a hole in your program that's just going to be impossible to fill and absolutely get it right like a third year in a row, the level that you've got to get it right to be back in a Final Four.

Just the two years of losing all those incredible men, it was a down year for us in '25. Across the board I had a bad year coaching. I think we didn't put together a great group. Maybe we were just feeling ourselves too much, too much ego. But I know that we had an incredible summer is what set the stage for what we've been able to do here.

We really got back to that summer grind where we went eight hard weeks and set a tone for our season. Then this group has just been resilient. We dealt with injuries the whole year. In the non-conference we were able to beat teams like Florida and Illinois, and with an injured roster. Then obviously we were able to advance through this tournament losing our quarterback but having a guy like Malachi Smith come in and step up.

I think we got that belief back in the program that we can win the National Championship.

Q. You've been to three different Final Fours, and



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you've talked about it, that it's just felt different. What has changed in your approach this time with the construct of the team that you have compared to the previous two?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, the advantage I haven't been here, and then you have the year we had last year, I think it's like, now you give yourself permission to enjoy it and appreciate it because it's hard to do, and it's harder to do than ever in college basketball because there's so many more programs that are brought into competing with for it, with NIL and portal. It's a deeper pool of teams you're competing against than prior.

Prior, you were eliminated from competing to get far in this tournament because everything on recruiting was based on tradition, branding, and there weren't that many programs that were investing. There's so many more people that are investing.

For me, I'm not scrambling around worrying about how to plan practices for this week or what are the responsibilities of the week because we've got those past experiences. I know exactly what the practice should look like this week. I don't have to call around and ask coaches. I don't have to call around and ask other coaches that have been here how to keep my team focused because you've just been through this process before.

I would say the biggest thing is when we're driving in the bus I'm looking out my window and allowing myself to enjoy it and I'm not going to lose my edge in terms of the monsters that we need to show up on Saturday night to get to the championship game.

We know we've got to flip the switch and be maniacal in our pursuit of getting to Monday night, but I'm going to let myself enjoy the parts that you should enjoy.

Q. You started the season on a heater of a run in the non-conference. Come Big East time you put together some inconsistent wins, fell off a little bit towards the back end of the calendar, and now the team seems to be putting up a similarly good stretch of runs and wins from similar to that previous non-con. How were you able to refocus your team around that in order to pull those kinds of results out of them?

DAN HURLEY: Well, I mean, some of it, as a coach, you talk about the areas that kind of hurt us. Turnovers have been an issue the whole year. We haven't been the offensive rebounding team. The shooting at times, which I think is -- going into the year I was thinking we're probably going to be maybe my best shooting team. We've kind of hit some tough stretches with making the threes.

So some of it was those things, and the rebounding and taking care of the ball are controllable. Obviously the shot making is not always controllable. It comes down to nerves and it comes down to performance and confidence.

Then part of why I think you end up dropping during the course of the year is, like, there weren't -- you're playing these brutal conference games in the Big East, and there weren't a lot of teams with high KenPoms or high efficiencies, so now you get into these street fight, rock fight conference games, and you end up winning a game by five versus a team that's maybe 33rd in some type of a ranking, you're now going to drop efficiency-wise as a team.

But I think we've always -- I've acknowledged it, our floor this year at times has been low. Our ceiling as a team has been really, really high.

Again, we proved the Florida game, the Illinois game, the BYU game when Saunders played and the other guard who -- what was my man's name, the shooter, big-time. He tore his ACL. When we beat them in Boston -- BYU was maybe an Elite Eight team, even a Final Four game. We showed a lot St. John's game at home, but our floor has been lower than in '23 and '24.

Q. Someone made a massive play late the other day as part of the comeback, finishing through contact on the break. How much went into that game and his season overall? He hasn't quite shot the ball the way he did last year, but I think he's made a lot of impact on the game in other ways. Your thoughts on his season?

DAN HURLEY: Listen, Solo has dealt with a wrist throughout the year. With shooting hand for a shooter, it's not an easy thing. He's such a threat and he's so capable. He played so great against Illinois and at MSG, he made some shots and that's always good for a player going in versus an opponent because that matters to a player's psyche.

But he's really guarded well for us in the Sweet 16 and in the Elite Eight, and when he's not making shots, he creates so much spacing for the others. As long as he guards and rebounds and makes efforts and plays as hard as he can -- he's still like a 30-minute a game incredibly valuable player for us who's got to keep his defense and his rebounding -- he had an offensive rebound on a missed three that if he doesn't get that offensive rebound, like, there is no Braylon Mullins shot. If he doesn't complete that three-point play, there is no deflection steal to end that game. So he made winning plays down the stretch.

I think there's something to people playing well against teams, and I think that's good for him coming into Saturday.

Q. Braylon said on Tuesday, I guess Tuesday's practice you got into him, just a reminder, put that shot behind you --

DAN HURLEY: No, not me.

Q. When someone hits a shot like that and now you have -- he's in his hometown, how do you think he kind of builds off that kind of shot? It's an incredible story, obviously, but it's also a lot of pressure on a kid.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, listen, it's like a dream come true, dream scenario, made-for-TV movie or -- I guess it goes right to streaming now.

Yeah, listen, we've got to shock -- I've been shock coaching really since Tuesday. I had to let everyone enjoy it. I couldn't come in on Monday like a cold damp blanket and just start destroying people on Monday. That just would have been a cruel thing to do to people's spirit after such an incredible victory.

But Tuesday you've just got to bring everybody back to reality. The reality is that moment is over. It's an incredible moment. You'll have that moment the rest of your life. But we came here for rings, not watches. Everyone that comes to the Final Four gets a beautiful watch, but only one group is going to get a ring.

So get off social media, stop injecting the dopamine into your arm and get serious about the preparation and the practice because we don't hang banners for Final Fours at UConn. We hang National Championship banners. If you want to hang a banner, you've got to get your eyes off social media, get your face out of the phone and get locked in on Illinois because Illinois is one of the best teams in the country and they're as big a threat to winning this tournament as any of the four teams.

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