

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

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Brad Underwood

Ben Humrichous

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



I've got a great staff that does that. I think it's about relationships and communication. We try to keep it as light as we can. We know it's kind of in the dark days of January and early February that it gets challenging. It challenges me to find ways to still be creative and have fun with it.

But this group has made it very easy. There's a lot of personality on this group, and to be very honest, there's not a lot for me to be unhappy about.

I think today is our 112th practice, and we have had very, very, very few bad days. That's a tribute to these guys.

Q. We've talked so much about all of the influx of international basketball players. Do you think that that influx would be possible in a world where there wasn't revenue sharing and NIL? Do you think they would be interested in coming here if they didn't have the opportunity to make a little money, or a lot of money?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, I think there's always been an interest. We've had them. And from different parts of the world, whether it was the Caribbean countries, whether it was African kids, it didn't matter. We've had some European kids.

I think the one thing that has changed is because of NIL is maybe the caliber of the young player that we're getting and the person we're getting.

I think there's always been tremendous intrigue in coming to the States and playing college basketball. I think that is heightened by what's gone on in the portal and NIL, and I think it's all been very, very positive.

I think there's very little -- from my standpoint, I've loved coaching each and every one of our guys, so it's a great fit for me personally, so I feel very comfortable saying that.

Q. You guys enter the tournament ranked second in Ken Pom offensive efficiency rating. How is your team able to produce in such a highly efficient offense?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's a great day. It's Friday. It's the day before all of this starts. Very excited. I think our team has had a couple great days of preparation, and excited for the open practice today.

Again, I think it's four incredible representatives of what college basketball is. My hats off to the NCAA. First time being here, just the class and the way this event is run, very, very impressive, the marketing. Our guys are having quite an enjoyable time.

Looking forward to -- at some point, you just kind of want to play. Looking forward to the opportunity tomorrow against UConn at 6:00.

Q. Coach, when you look at the Final Four and everything that's gone into the last four or five weeks along with the regular season, how do you keep mental health in check for these young men over this stretch and over the season and getting into something like this and staying grounded? What's your philosophy towards that?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think it's a really good question. I think the one thing that we all understand is the season is a grind. It's a long season. It's not without its pitfalls. It's not without its shortcomings. It's not without its injuries and all of that.

I think the one thing we try to do is make sure it's fun. We try to celebrate winning. We spend a good amount of time laughing and enjoying the process. I don't want it to ever be -- I don't want our process to ever be just a grind-it, fight, no-fun environment. I want it to be enjoyable. I want the work to be fun.

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BRAD UNDERWOOD: They're good. Got good bigs. I think the one thing, it's about fitting the pieces of a puzzle together. We've been up there all year.

I think that it affects our recruiting, how we've gone about it, positional size and shooting. It's opened the court up. We've found the right pieces. Andrej Stojakovic, a guy who can get downhill and drive it. Shot selection is a huge part of that. If you look at shot charts almost every game they're lay-ups or threes. We take very few mid-range jump shots. Offensive rebounding, getting fouled, all of those play into that.

It's very much a math equation for us and analytics. I've got a bunch of young guys who are very smart in those areas and help me understand it, but I think the biggest thing is we've got good players who can all space the floor, and then I think it's been sticking to a plan in terms of shot selection and how we go about it.

Q. It's your first Final Four experience as a coach. You've been here for a couple days now. I'm curious, what's been the most unexpected aspect of your experience so far this week?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You know, I think that you come so often as a coach and you're a spectator. I tip my cap to the NCAA. I think the experience for the student-athlete, for the players is incredible. I've been just taken aback by just the little things, whether it's the pillowcases, the blankets on the bed, the player rooms in the hotel. Just the driving through the arena here, the signage.

It just makes those players feel really, really good that they've accomplished something and it's not just another tournament or event. My hats off to that. It's been pretty cool to see.

Q. You've played UConn before. You've played similar teams with offensive styles where they run a lot of pin-downs, a lot of actions. How much do you specifically get to prepare for the team this week? How much time do you have? Or are you just worried about what you guys can defend?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: No, I think one of the things that we do is we spend a good amount of time trying to prepare the best we can. With this game, you've obviously got a couple days to spend on it and prepare.

One of the things that UConn does as well as anybody in the country is their off-ball screening and their pin-downs. So it's a little different than when you see a team that's going to ball screen all the time.

Different actions, different responsibilities for your players. So we've spent a good amount of time trying to prepare.

Then it ultimately comes down to you've got to be very solid in your base, in your foundation and what you do, and hope you can just make shots as hard as you can make them.

Q. Serbia and Balkan is watching closely college basketball, never before like that because of the presence of players from the Balkan area. My question would be related to depends as a key point in a game of many European clubs, what is your opinion since we notice defense is also like from your team presented a lot, so what is your opinion about that?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think it's one of the adjustments that those young players have had to make is on the defensive side. I think that we've tried to keep it very simple. Communication, believe it or not, is one of the challenging pieces to the transition on both sides of the court, offensively and defensively, but just understanding that we have a saying, quiet teams lose.

We've just got to make sure that -- and we know this happens a lot, that Mirk and Tommy talk a lot not in English to each other. There's a lot of that going on.

But we've also got to make sure that all the other guys are understanding as well.

The communication piece has been the biggest challenge on the defensive side. They're well schooled. They're well-taught. That part is easy. They've got great IQ.

It's been more of a communication challenge than anything else to get guys to buy in chemistry-wise.

Q. I think it was a month and a half after the UCLA game, it got -- after the game, you kind of made a point to where your team gets on a big run and then they seem to relax a little bit, take their foot off the gas. Obviously you're here now, and I'm curious, how do you sense the mental transition that your team has made to not let those things become a factor during this run that you've had?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, we were up 33-10 and just kind of stopped.

I think the biggest issue has been, to be quite honest, health and chemistry. Obviously we were still trying to work both Andrej and Kylan back into the fold after coming off injuries, and I've talked a lot about that. It was not easy.

Jake Davis, Ben Humrichous were playing great in those stretches. Our offensive numbers railroad going through the roof. We were clicking.

Now you've got two of your best defenders that you've got to find a way back in. It took us a little bit, and we were inconsistent while doing that.

It's not easy to come back from a broken hand and it's not easy to come back from a high ankle sprain and be 100 percent, and yet we're here today because we went through some of those struggles.

But our chemistry has been great. Their health has been -- they get better every day. Maybe some of those struggles were what we needed at that time, but it wasn't much fun.

Q. Curious to that point, you faced a team that was down 19 last game. Beyond the challenges that UConn presents tactically, what has your conversation been and the messaging with your team about the scrappiness of UConn and their ability of never really being down and out?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I look at one guy -- well, two. I look at Danny and then I look at Karaban. Their cultures -- I think this is their third Final Four. You understand why they're here. It's never -- things have to go right in a 19-point comeback, and they did.

But there was no quit. There was no lay-down. We've talked a lot about that.

This team got down, I don't know, 20 against St. John's, fought back, fought back, fought back. That one didn't go their way, but there was no quit.

Danny seems to push the right buttons when it's either going to his bench or finding that matchup or finding a five that works. Hats off to him in that area.

But I think our group knows. We saw a little bit of the same thing in some of our tournament games with Houston and Iowa, that there's no lay-down. Houston, we had a 20-point lead and they didn't lay down. It's not something we're not accustomed to.

Q. Rick Barnes spoke about this last week in regards to recruiting. He said, you can recruit a guy for a week and get him, you know what I mean, hey, what's your number. And talking about the way recruiting has changed over the years, especially in this era. Dusty May discussed that yesterday and brought up Coach Barnes saying since it's been streamlined, it's been more efficient than ever. In your eyes over the last few

years, what has recruiting been like for you? Do you kind of echo their sentiments or is there a different trajectory for you?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, it's speed dating. I think the one thing that we have done is instead of spending four years recruiting a kid, we've just dove in headlong into what is important to us. We have four pillars, as we call them. It's positional size, shooting, basketball IQ, and character.

We've dove into that, and we've got a group of people. We've become very reliant -- I've spoken about this a great deal, on personality testing. We do process testing, how guys process.

But the most important thing is who we let into our locker room. I just took it from the NBA. Having NBA guys, they come in and they spend a lot of time and money and energy finding out backgrounds on our players and they talk to everybody but the coach. Bar owners, RAs in dorms, and they get all the background. I said, if they're going to do it, we need to do that. So we've invested heavily in information, and personality testing is a big part of it.

We don't just let anybody in our locker room. We're more streamlined. It's something that happens very quickly. We have a database, our GM does, of every player in the country, and then the ones we're interested in that come across our way potentially, then we do a deep dive into all that stuff before we bring them on campus.

Q. Coach, do you feel like there is going to be a copycat syndrome of the recruiting that you've done internationally? You're not the only school who's done it, obviously, but are you worried that everyone is going to take your blueprint?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Sure, yeah. I still think the one thing that is not talked about enough, yes, we dove hard. I think it goes back to Orlando Antigua, Geoff Alexander and the years and years of relationships that they have built over there. Those young guys aren't coming here without the relationships that have been worked hard on with people over there.

I went to Belgrade. I did a clinic last summer. I spent four days over there, had the time of my life, and when it comes to a basketball coach, I was in pure heaven talking basketball.

Those relationships are very, very important. It's not just go over there and say we're going to recruit. I'm sure there will be others try and do that, but I hope it doesn't become

just about an NIL deal. It's about the relationship and the substance, and we've obviously had a lot of successes with style of play and our development of players, as well.

Q. You guys had a tough non-conference schedule and a tough Big Ten opener with that buzzer beater against Nebraska. How did that set you guys up for this long haul of a season?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You're trying to get me off to a good start right away, huh, bringing that one up? We do that on purpose. One of the great things that we try to do is make sure that, one, when it comes to the NCAA Tournament, there's no glitches, when it can possibly be affected by seeding or strength of schedule.

Secondly, what it does for our student-athletes, our players, is prepare us for everything that could come in league play, styles of play that are different, and I really believe in that. I believe in playing the toughest competition ever.

The Big Ten obviously was incredible this year. It's been so well-represented in the Sweet 16 and two of us here in the Final Four. I would hope our players think that that is a real positive. I think they enjoy playing in those type of games.

Unfortunately Nebraska did beat us on a buzzer beater in the first game -- was that the first game? First game, yeah. That gets your attention when you lose a home game in this league.

They obviously had a great year, and I tip my cap to Fred and the Lawrence kid who hit it. But yeah, that wasn't quite as much fun that night.

Q. Ben, do you enjoy the challenges of scheduling, as well?

BEN HUMRICHIOUS: Yeah, I think, first of all, it's fun because for us as players you get to play the top competition. For me, that's especially why I came here to the University of Illinois, enjoying the challenge that you get playing competition like that.

But I also think it's great for us because it prepares us with opportunities of adversity which is where we grow at our best. Being able to play tough competition with different styles and game plans and stuff like that, it's great for our development as a team. And so that's only what you want, especially at the start of your season, and then you get it all Big Ten play.

Q. Coach, you've been working your entire career to

be at an event like this. Can you talk about being in Indiana in a basketball-crazy state in a state that really embraces hosting an event like this?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, there's a lot of parallels between that and one of the reasons I wanted to be the coach at the University of Illinois. They are basketball rich in tradition. The high school basketball is legendary. As a kid growing up in Kansas, we always heard about how great Indiana basketball was, how great Illinois basketball is.

I've said this is one of the great venues for the Final Four. Every single year, obviously the NCAA is housed here, but as long as I can remember, these have always been an incredible environment for the Final Four, the proximity, everything is downtown, the venues, all of it play hand in hand.

But you've got very knowledgeable fans. You've got passionate fans. It just makes for one of the great, great events in all of the sporting world is right here in the heart of America in the great city of Indianapolis.

Q. In the last three games you guys haven't allowed more than 60 points. Was there a specific message regarding defense late in the tournament rather than just throughout the season? Obviously defense is always going to be at the forefront, but throughout the tournament, at this stage of the season, was there kind of a specific message regarding defense that elevated you guys' play?

BEN HUMRICHIOUS: I think one of the keys to our success has been the buy-in to the process. Three of our principles is don't give up lay-ups, protect the logo and then rebound.

I think what's been great with this team has been our buy-in to that process even to the small this fundamentals with the way that we start every possession, in a stance with a great presence, using our size and our length to even just kind of -- to where the teams have to think about the size and length that we provide each possession.

Our buy-in from our players, the way our coaching staff has relayed that message and emphasized its importance, I think, has been a big part of why we've been so successful defensively.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think I'd also add the consistency piece has grown. We talked about that travels -- defensive and rebounding travels. It's one of the things that has to carry over. We've been very blessed on the offensive side most of the year and just finding that level of

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consistency, and it's all about the margins.

We lost a lot of games that were very close in overtime. You talk about a buzzer beater, that was a game that comes down to one possession. It's not the possession at the end of the game, it's a possession in the first half because we didn't do something right.

So we've talked a lot about that throughout the course of the season, and these guys have bought into that.

Q. Building off of the question, this UConn team who has a lot of size and offensive ability, how do you apply that consistency in those newly found defensive keys to this UConn team?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think one of the things that since we've played UConn right after Thanksgiving, I think that they're doing things a little differently than they did at that time. Tarris Reed was coming off an injury, Mullins was coming off an injury back in that game. We're a lot different, as well.

But you've seen just a different shift with their group. Tarris is averaging 24 and 14 or whatever in the tournament, so there's a lot more post-ups. They don't ball screen maybe as much as some teams in the country, so there's a lot more off-ball screening that you've got to get acclimated to and movement.

Danny does one of the best jobs in all of coaching with that part of it. Then they've got very good shooting.

They've got great balance, and they take 24 three-point attempts a game and you've got to have that balance. Then when it comes down to it, you've got to be tough enough and gritty enough to keep them off the glass.

Q. I'd like to go back to what you said about playing in this venue. Obviously Lucas Oil is a lot different than your standard college basketball stadium. How have you prepared the team to play in an environment like this?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, we don't worry about it too much. We got to play in here in the Big Ten Tournament back when it was the COVID year, but it's obviously a different setup.

Yeah, there will be a few more thousand people and the venue is just fabulous, I think the job the NCAA has done setting it up.

Both teams have to go out and play in it, and it'll be loud, it'll be boisterous, and be a lot of fun.

Q. Getting here has obviously been an emotional roller coaster. What are some of the emotions that you're having right now, and how do you think that may affect your game this weekend?

BEN HUMRICHIOUS: There's definitely a great excitement. This moment is a culmination of a lot of days and efforts over the course of a season. So there's a lot of excitement, but there's a lot of gratitude for where we are.

And what gratitude I think does for us and this team is adds an extra energy and effort to each of our moments, even just a focus in our preparation and commitment to our process.

For me and a lot of our -- for our team, it's just gratitude, thankful for the moment. So we want to celebrate the success, but then even approaching the game with the respect that it deserves because of the culmination of the efforts up to this point.

Q. Coach, can it be emotional for you?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Sure, no doubt. I'm 62 years old. I was a kid. I grew up watching this event. You're the kid that's in your driveway shooting hoops and you're going to hit the game winner in the National Championship game. I never got to do that. It's been well-documented my journey has been a little bit different than a lot of people, 26 years to become a head coach and some different paths to get here.

You watch it, and you dream. I say this all the time: There's no bigger dreamer than me. You get here, and there's a moment of reflection when we got here. But you never lose sight of -- and we have a saying in our program, everyday guys.

There's never a moment lost that it's not thinking about the next game, thinking about maximizing the opportunity, and there will be more time for reflection after this is over.

You've got a responsibility to 15 guys in that locker room, a group of coaches to be your very best, and we're going to try to do that.

Q. Coach, we know you have junior college roots. Later today we are going to go through all the news conferences for all the Final Four participants, also have the NIT participants joins is, and also the Division II and Division II student-athletes and coaches.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's an incredible tribute to the success of basketball to have those here. And watching



the NIT game going on over at Butler, you've got the culmination of a season, and I think it's great for the coaching profession that they're all here.

I was a junior college player. I was a junior college coach. My experiences there were incredible. They helped forge the opportunity for me to be here. I spent 10 years at Western Illinois at a low major level, and I wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't for all the people involved in that. And it doesn't matter if you're Division III, I'm talking to the coach at Emory last year, and you just have to dream.

Anything can be possible with a lot of hard work and some big dreams.

Q. Coach, you mentioned that you've been blessed offensively this season with a lot of depth. On the other side of the ball, how does that depth help you defensively when you're facing a UConn team that's strong and scrappy and could come back at any moment?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I think the one thing has been that there's been very consistent, no drop-off, and in some ways it's been better when we go to our bench. We've gained that depth. I say all the time, we've got eight starters. It's a tribute to those guys. Some guys feel a little better coming off the bench.

Ben has been a starter some and he's been a guy that's come off the bench, and it's uplifting when you know that you go to the bench as a coach and you get better not just on one side of the better, you get better on both.

You have to have that. To win, you have to have more than five guys. That's been a strength of this team all year is our quality guys that have come in off the bench.

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