

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

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Hinkle Fieldhouse

UConn Huskies

Coach Dan Hurley

Alec Millender

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference

DAN HURLEY: You watch Illinois from the first time we played them, obviously, like every team that's playing in this tournament or has advanced in the tournament, a much better version of themselves in terms of identity. Just expect a real war. We've been in multiple wars in this tournament, and we're excited to play tomorrow night.

Q. Keaton Wagler has just been on a tear, one of the best freshmen in the country. What have you seen from him and his growth from the November game to now?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, obviously has the ball in his hands a lot more. Just very aggressive scorer, at the rim, from the three-point line. Great size. Just the vision, obviously, that their staff had and Brad had for the player in terms of just how he was recruited and what they saw.

The guy is a really, really talented player. Obviously we're going to have to try to make him uncomfortable.

We've got to make them uncomfortable because they're such an excellent offensive team and offensive rebounding team.

Q. In your previous two title teams, you've had one or two freshmen who have been a really big part of your success. This year you have Braylon Mullins, and when you listen to him talk he sounds like a vet who's been around. How do you go about recruiting guys like him as freshmen who are going to be able to be mature and ready for these big moments like he's been?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, you obviously watch the player. There's the talent thresholds, there's the athletic traits that



you need. Then what do you anticipate losing with the program the year before, like what hole are you going to have in your program for that player.

But really, it's those initial phone calls. It's how they respond to text messages that you send, are they ignorant or are do they have humility when you talk to them. The family, do you have good parents, do you have parents that have real good values. Then the high school coach, like the high school program. Did he play in a place that he's been coached, he's been corrected, he's been told no, he's been told that what he's doing is not good enough.

At UConn, I don't know that we'll ever -- I think our teams are always going to have balance, because when you look at the '24 I think Donovan, Steph Castle were our fourth and fifth leading scorers on that team, and Braylon's numbers are probably a hair better than Steph's were in '24.

Yeah, you come to UConn, you've got to fit -- you've got to be able to fit into our team. You're not just going to be the face of it, so you have to have a humility about you.

Q. What similarities, if any, does this team have to your championship teams in '23 and '24?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, just maybe more the '23 team, just because it dealt with real adversity during the year, whether it was injuries or just that bad January that we had in '23; whereas this team has had to fight through injuries, it's had to fight through some bad losses and some low-floor moments during the season.

It hasn't been a joyride. '23 wasn't a joyride until -- it was in the beginning. In the middle it wasn't, and in the end it was.

This team has been resilient like the '23 team. The '24 team we were just destroyers and it's one of the best teams of all time, and I think the players have proven that are in the NBA right now. It was an under appreciated time at the time, but this team is resilient, has fortitude, has earned the respect of the staff.

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Q. Obviously we see how great of a player Alex Karaban is when watching him play, but what are some things we don't see that have brought him to this stage so frequently?

DAN HURLEY: It's like hiring a babysitter for your team. He just babysits your team for 40 and a half years. I mean, he's been the best babysitter.

I guess now we're paying him in NIL. I mean, he babysits them. He's the greatest problem solver you'll ever have in practice, in game, and then, like, the tone he sets for your culture with his work habits, the peer pressure that that puts on everyone in the organization when your best player works as hard as he does, it just puts enormous pressure on everyone to stay out of Ted's at night, which is a bar on campus, and to be in the gym shooting.

Q. Illinois has been defensively at a different level over the last couple games this tournament. What have you seen them improve upon since your last matchup on that end in November?

DAN HURLEY: Well, they have the -- Illinois has the attributes to be really good on defense. They've got length. They're smart. They're physical. They're one of the best coached teams you'll see, that you'll play against with Brad and his staff. They've just got an awesome staff.

But I also think what they do, which not a lot of people do and that we do, is they game plan. They mix up their coverages. They don't play the same defense every single game.

I think they're a program and a staff that game plans, so you have to be prepared for multiple things. They're not just going to guard you the way that they guarded Houston. They're going to look for things to take away.

Q. Dan, you used the term "picked apart" yesterday when you referred to some of the criticism you've gotten. Do you think you've gotten a bad rap? And does it ever bother you?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I'm not a victim. I've done everything. I did what I did. We don't allow victims in our program, and I'm not a 53 year old man sitting up here like I'm some victim.

I don't want to waste a lot of time with it because it takes away from the team.

But for me, the way I view what we're going into in the game, when some people, again, view it as a game, just

my family, how I was raised in the sport, where I'm from in Jersey, we look at it more like a battle. I think I've kind of talked about that a lot. I'm not a victim.

Let's go.

Q. You talked yesterday about how you needed a warrior with Silas this season. Can you take me through his recruiting process again, what you saw in him, where you saw he'd be able to fit this team, and what he's given you to this day?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, he's got great presence about him, and, again, it comes from the family. We're only having the success we've had the last couple years because of the pedigree of the people that we bring in here. He comes from a great family, incredible inner circle with also a dad, former football player, so he's got a football player DNA in terms of his physicality and that warrior mentality, which is not always something with basketball players.

Yeah, we needed that trait. We were a soft team last year. You could tell on the visit when he led us in prayer. He had only known us for a couple hours, and he had the staff and his family hold hands before we had the recruiting dinner and we prayed together before our meal, and we all held hands and he led the prayer.

I think that's when you knew that the guy has got some, like, special quality about him to do that at your recruiting dinner with people you don't know at UConn. Impressive leader.

Q. When you look at the mental health of this team going through the stretch the beginning of the season, going through the postseason, all the way here to Indianapolis, what do you do or how do you keep these guys grounded and in the right headspace where they don't let the moment get the best of them?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, so many things. I think number one, relative to the mental health and wellness, you try to promote as much as you can. If you need it, seeking counseling, seeking therapy. I think it's a really healthy thing for all people.

Obviously we have mental skills coaches to try to keep these guys with their mindfulness practices, whether that's meditation or visualization or mantras. Also I think it's important -- it doesn't have to be Christian at this, but having some type of a spiritual side of your life is critically important.

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real world. Like get off Twitter, get off Instagram, stop reading the comments. That's probably why it doesn't bother me when people have things to say.

I'm sorry about going back to that question from before, but I don't live in that world. My world and the world I think is the best world to live in is the real world which is interacting with people, putting your phone down.

I get much more of a bad reaction from people, I think, on social media than when I meet regular people, because anytime I meet regular people they look at me and they start laughing or they start smiling, or like, you're the guy from the video, you look a little crazy but I think you're a good egg.

Q. Luke Murray is one of two guys in this field that's going to be up for a head coaching job. With the urgency to get NIL and transfer portal and all that in a new place, how do those things change for those guys making this transition?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, Luke is unique because he doesn't sleep anyway. The guy is -- he's at it nonstop. He's doing a great job of just balancing his responsibilities of getting a staff hired, starting to figure out his roster, while also being prepared to have us ready for Monday, if we're fortunate enough to be playing.

But he's obsessed. He's a sick, obsessed guy that doesn't need much sleep, so he's able to balance it pretty good.

Q. Dan, a few of your guys are saying we're here for rings, not watches speech in practice this week. When you landed, everyone got helmets, like Indy helmets. Do you feel the need just to remind them because it was such a crazy win and also a lot of people think it's Arizona or Michigan's title to win here?

DAN HURLEY: Well, I thought it was fitting that they gave me that helmet, the race car helmet. I probably could have used it on Sunday night. Or that might have been bad. Might have made it worse.

Yeah, you talk to your players through social media sometimes, I think. How hard it is to get to a Final Four, just the accomplishment of getting to a Final Four, I'm not -- listen, it's easier for us to say because we've won two of the last four and now we're back here, so obviously it's a great feeling and it's a great accomplishment, but you're talking to your players through social media a little bit, too.

It's such an incredible fight and moment for us. We don't want to have a hangover and you don't want to feel like you accomplished something by getting here when you have a

chance to win a game and play for a National Championship.

Q. How different is it for you this year compared to -- you came here the last two times, you were the favorite, and this year you're an underdog in the game tomorrow and everyone seems to think it's Michigan or Arizona's to win --

DAN HURLEY: It doesn't feel that much different. We did come in here with quite a bluster. I don't know. I'm not really -- I'm just thinking about trying to beat Illinois right now. I'm really not paying much attention to the second game because there's no reason for me to pay attention to the second game because all it's about right now is Illinois.

Q. You called last year's team "soft," which seems the antithesis of you. I'm curious over the off-season was there a reflection point for your coaching or how to build a roster or something to do to not have that?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I think some of it comes from some conversations with Billy Donovan, who was in a similar position. You go back to back and then you're not quite able to maintain that level that third year and be where you were.

Obviously I had a bad year. I think it's hard not to be not at your best when you have such long seasons. You're celebrating in parades and honored and throwing out first pitches and you're at the White House and doing all these things, and you're not as dialed in as you need to be with the roster you out together, with your leadership, with you improving as a coach, with you being that same driving force as the leader of the organization.

Our season ended earlier last year. We had more time. It was an ego explosion the whole way, the whole year. That dose of humility I think was great for our organization, for me. We got kind of back to our roots of the type of roster we want to put together and the type of habits we want to develop as a tough, resilient, championship-level team.

Q. Obviously there was a question asked earlier about Illinois's defensive improvement this tournament and you already talked about their offense that's been proven throughout the whole season. You obviously can't forecast a game exactly how it's going to go, but two teams that are very physical, that shoot relatively mostly within the three-point line. Do you see that the winner of this game might come out succeeding at the three-point line, extending the floor, maybe steering away from your style a little bit, or do you think it'll be a battle of the physicality, a battle of the rising defenses?

DAN HURLEY: Listen, there's going to be a shot-making component to this, like there always is. That's kind of a bail-out, I guess, part of an answer. But a lot of this comes down to turnover margin, who takes better care of the basketball, who wins this -- for us we're looking at the rebounding like it's World War III on the backboard because of how they assault you on the glass and how important rebounding is in terms of victory.

Then I would say for us, all screen defense. You can't show them one ball screen. You've got to have a plan A, a plan B, a plan C, a plan D because so much of what they do, it's isolations. It's ball screen defense. You probably couldn't play more different than we do at the offensive end of the court.

We move around a lot more, and they attack you at elbows, at the key, at the low post.

So who is more physical at those battle points, the block outs, the screenings, who's getting moved on screens and who's burying people on screens, that's going to determine who wins.

Q. Alec, can you tell us what you did at the Final Four last year?

ALEC MILLENDER: Yes, I was covering stories, basically doing game stories. I covered Houston a lot last year, Sweet 16, Elite Eight, and then I was able to go to the Final Four. I did game stories on the National Championship and the semifinal game. It was a great experience for me. I really enjoyed it. I was thankful for my IU Indy professors they were allowing me to go there.

Q. What is the vibe in the locker room like knowing that you guys still have room to grow with potential? Is it encouraging, or do you guys feel like you've reached your final form, you've reached your peak?

ALEC MILLENDER: We're getting back to business. We really got a day to enjoy it. Our minds were everywhere, kind of couldn't think, kids going to class, couldn't really focus in class, but after that we got right back to business, right back to practice.

Coach really got back on it and instilled that job is not done. Great shot, great play, it was a great game, but we have more to do. We came for rings, not watches. We're trying to hang a banner for the National Championship, not the Final Four. We have to finish.

DAN HURLEY: I think the reason we're not like a 35- or a 36-win team right now -- a 33-win team is pretty good, but

at times we haven't taken care of the ball. At times we haven't been the rebounding team we need to be. At times we haven't made the perimeter shots at the level that we need to.

If we could put all of those three things together here, we're going to have a chance to win it.

Q. Obviously you guys met up with the Fighting Illini earlier --

DAN HURLEY: You're not Creighton, you're University of Nebraska at Omaha?

Q. Yes, not Creighton. Will that change your response to my question?

DAN HURLEY: A little bit. It'll change my energy level. Congrats to Coach Mack, too. Total beast.

Q. You guys met up with the fighting Illini this November. You're two different teams just from the four months that you guys have taken to get to this point. With the win in the back of your mind, what's the blueprint for replicating that performance and moving on to the National Championship?

ALEC MILLENDER: We have to do the hard things. We have to be us. We have to rebound. We have to rebound. Everybody goes for them. We have to just be tough. We have to do what we've done all season: Work hard, fight hard the whole game, hit our key points of our game goals. We have to win a lot of the little points in the game, the hard points of the game, and if we do that, it'll follow.

We have to put our defense first, not really worry on offense. Once we work hard on defense, do the little things, offensive flow, shots will fall, and everything will fall into place.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, we're going to make adjustments on that game. Both teams did well and not so well. Obviously Wagler is a much bigger part of things. But really Boswell and the other guard that played in that game, both played great against us.

Braylon Mullins I think checked into the game with like 10 minutes to go in the second half; Tarris Reed shelved himself. They had all types of injuries. You take some things from the game. Obviously you'd rather have won the game than lost the game.

It doesn't matter a whole lot, but if you're going to have played somebody in November and then you're going to play them in this spot, you'd probably rather have won than

have lost it.

Q. My question is Indiana, a few states like Indiana are synonymous with basketball. What does it mean you could add to a legacy of Indiana basketball and what that means to you to be here this weekend?

DAN HURLEY: He's from Chicago, so he's like --

ALEC MILLENDER: Honestly, I grew up hating Indiana a little bit --

DAN HURLEY: All right, so what I think -- is that it? You want to leave that? All right, keep going.

ALEC MILLENDER: It's amazing. It's a blessing to be here, to add to that legacy. We can't wait to do it. Hopefully we leave here as national champions.

DAN HURLEY: Growing up as a kid, as the son of a high school coach, just the aura and the legendary Bobby Knight, obviously John Wooden, the incredible coaches, and then just as a player growing up, Larry Bird and the legend of Damon Bailey and hearing about Jay Edwards when you're a kid and watching "Hoosiers" the movie. My brother was in Blue Chips. Everyone from Indiana was in it, Nick Nolte -- Blue Chips had nothing to do with Indiana?

Q. At least loosely based, right?

DAN HURLEY: All right, here we go. It's an honor to be here.

Q. It was like a generic --

DAN HURLEY: They were blue. Was it like the Dolphins or something like that? My brother was in that. The guy from Married With Children, Ed something.

Q. You and your father seem to have a similar demeanor and coaching philosophy. Would you say he has any superstitions like you do before big games?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I do. Sweater vests and polos, he would wear like a -- and it could be -- he's playing games in February in Jersey, January in Jersey, it's minus 5 degrees and he's got on a polo with a sweater vest. Most people would be wearing a long sleeve.

I think the shoes, too, because they were pretty worn. He wasn't too into his clothes. But he must have had a superstition with his clothes because he wore the same shoes for such a long period of time.

That's all I have to say about him right now.

Q. There are so many different emotions that run with the Final Four and getting here and being here. What would you say is kind of the highlight of your emotions that are going on right now, and how do you think that's going to affect you on the court?

ALEC MILLENDER: Honestly, just trying to balance my emotions. I'm trying to keep everything as level as I can. The appreciation I have to be here is through the roof, but I also want to just keep it to the point where there's still business to handle. I don't want to walk around here like oh, I'm just happy to be here. I still want to win. I know the team wants to win.

Balancing those emotions of being grateful for the opportunity that we have, the hard work we put in, and kind of celebrating being able to get here but also channeling that into anger, focus, determination and just finishing the job.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, listen, some teams' season ended like a week before the Big East Tournament, which was like an eternity ago. Literally the teams that get this far, it's such a long season. It's incredibly enjoyable. There's a level of fatigue because, again, you are outlasting all these other programs until you're down to four.

The joy and the love that you have for team, for giving you such a long season, when you get to stay together longer, more meals, more bus trips, more flights, it just increases your love for your team.

You don't love every team the same. Some teams cause you more heartbreak and you only love them a little bit. This team, we love a whole lot.

Q. You mentioned those moments of love with the team. What's one moment off court that really just solidified that special team bond and that love that you all have for one another?

ALEC MILLENDER: I think it was an 11-point comeback in the softball game, and I won MVP.

DAN HURLEY: No.

ALEC MILLENDER: It was 13 points. We came back and beat Coach Hurley's team. Yes.

DAN HURLEY: And actually the game was actually nullified because they had illegal players that they were pulling into the game because they were down like 12 runs going into the last inning.

These guys cheated and then they celebrated after, but when we got into the building the next day, I took all of their trophies that they got and I declared it a no contest and I named myself MVP. As a matter of fact, I didn't even nullify it, I took the championship.

ALEC MILLENDER: Yeah, he did.

DAN HURLEY: But I think what makes the group special, we practice hard, we train hard. You see us on game night. It's not just me on the sideline. Our bench is alive, fighting for every possession. But I think what people don't see is the -- just a group of men that kind of give each other a hard time, are vulnerable with each other, make fun of each other, tell each other the truth, have that really, really close bond.

Q. Alec, you don't get that much playing time, and the team looks to you as a leader still. I'm curious what leadership means to you and what it looks like to you in spite of that lack of time on the floor.

ALEC MILLENDER: It's just a credit to my teammates. They really have embraced me. They listen to what I say. When I'm talking in the huddle, they look at me, look at me in my eyes. They really value what I say, so that makes it a lot easier for me to do what I do.

Leadership is kind of going out there, seeing what you see, leading by how hard you play, leading by how you practice, doing the right things daily, and they've really allowed me to do that.

I can't give credit to them enough about what a good group of guys they are. Every day they just kind of embrace me. They let me be follow and I kind of follow off of them. We bounce off of each other, and I really appreciate that.

DAN HURLEY: This man, number one, he's been through a lot in his life. He comes from an incredible family. You meet his dad, and you can figure out how you've got just a special man. The guy has got charisma, he's got personality, he's got a great work ethic. He's a great competitor. He's just a respected -- somebody that it's easy to respect.

When a real one tells your truth about yourself, you're going to listen to it. He's done so much for the team. Obviously he helped us get here. Without his minutes versus Furman in the first round of the game where we were really battling to get out of, this guy made an impact in that game for us.

He's helped us win games. He's helped us prepare every

day. He's one of the better leaders that have worn the uniform.

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