

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

Saturday, April 4, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Keaton Wagler

Tomislav Ivisic

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference



UConn 71, Illinois 62

BRAD UNDERWOOD: A lot of credit to UConn. They fight. They compete. Very, very good basketball team. Seemed like we were fighting uphill all day. I felt really good at half being down eight. They were 42 percent on twos. They banked one in.

I liked our looks. Even though we were 3 of 14 from three, I liked every one of our looks. I thought defensively it was the tempo that we wanted. I thought we were really solid, and we were down eight.

We fought, we fought, we fought, and had a very tough shooting night, especially at the rim. We missed some shots that we normally don't miss. It's part of this game. The ball has to go in. You hold a team to 35 percent from the field -- we've had the No. 1 offense in the country all year, and again, give UConn credit. They forced some of those misses.

But again, I thought our looks were really good, and I wouldn't do anything on that side over again. Couldn't be prouder -- I'm really bad at the end of seasons, guys. I'm terrible.

I've been doing this a long time, and I've never been around a group of guys who have given me more joy. We didn't have bad practices. They played for the name on the front.

Andrej came here with the intent of being around winning and being a part of that, and this young man has grown to a whole new level. I couldn't be prouder of him.

I think our fans, I can't say enough about the Illini Nation. They were here strong. They have been everywhere strong. I think they fell in love with this group because of who they are as people. It's just an extremely high-character locker room. Endings stink.

The year Keaton had, the year Tommy had, I can go right on down the list: A huge thank you to Ben Humrichous, Kylan Boswell, AJ Redd, who I should mentioned was the scholar athlete of the Final Four. Speaks volumes to who those people are, and Kylan and Ben and that group will be revered in Illinois lore. We'll hang banners.

But today was not our day. I want them to all hold their head high and feel proud of the jersey they wore. I'm selfish here when I say this, the joy that they gave me this year was very, very meaningful.

Q. Keaton, I know it's a tough locker room scene right now. Can you share what it was like, even though it was a losing effort, share those last moments with your fellow teammates in the locker room?

KEATON WAGLER: Yeah, there was a lot of emotions, a lot of tears. I think that just shows how hard we worked this whole year. You never want the season to end. That's what it was.

I think we had a really great season, a special season, making history. I love each and every one of my teammates, and I wouldn't have wanted to do it with anyone else.

Q. Tommy, feels like you guys played your heart out tonight. Coming into tonight you knew you had to take care of Tarris Reed. Do you feel like it came down to just bad luck at the rims?

TOMISLAV IVISIC: I don't know, I feel like we missed a lot of shots at the rim that we usually make. I don't know how other way to call it than bad luck. They were definitely more -- they used their opportunities better than we did, and yeah.

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Q. Brad, what does this game tell you about the thin nest of margins, especially at this level of the sport?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: That's all we talk about all year long. It's margins. They're so small. Winning is really hard. Getting here is really hard. Winning is really hard.

It's why I have so much appreciation for Alex Karaban. He's been to three of them. That's freaky.

It's a rebound, it's a loose ball, it's a ball rolling in, it's a banked three. One-possession game. It's what that is.

No possessions off, no time to -- you can't afford turnovers or whatever it is. It's a margin, and it's very small.

Q. After the game against UConn in New York you had mentioned that you got a high volume of what you called gold medal shots in that game, as well. Over the last three times you've played UConn, three seasons, '24, '25, '26, your total in those games is your lowest scoring output as a team in those three games over the last three seasons. What specifically about UConn makes it tough for you guys to score?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I don't know. Maybe it's the uniforms. I don't know. We make those shots against everybody else.

Yeah, I don't know. I felt so good about the shots. When you miss some easy ones, then it stresses your defense. I couldn't have been happier with our defense. I just thought that -- again, we're at the rim in some of those. Those are point-blank shots that we missed. Then it's wide-open threes.

It's just part of the breaks. I don't make too much of it against one team, but give them a lot of credit. They are very good defensively. They're a top-10 defense. But we've seen those all year and still made shots.

Q. Sorry for the loss. You have offered Chinese prospect Boyuan Zhang earlier this year. I know he hasn't made his decision to join the team and I might be a bit early to ask, but I'm just wondering if he joins Illinois as a team for next season, do you think he can help the team to take the next step for next season?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, I don't think we would be recruiting anybody -- and I'm not going to get into specific prospects -- but I don't think we'd be recruiting anybody that we feel like can't play for us, so I'll leave it at that.

Q. Brad, you had told me a year ago in Milwaukee that

your goal is to still and always will be to win a National Championship. You came up two games short of that. What will be your biggest holistic takeaway, and can you talk about how proud you are of this group and how proud this group made you as a coach?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You know, I told our coaches, I said, when they beat us in the Elite Eight, we were right there. That was a bad feeling; this is even worse.

I thought that team was a Final Four team but just lost to them in the Elite Eight. I thought we were a National Championship caliber team. I'll say what I always say, and it sounds redundant, but I apologize, you just have to keep knocking on the door.

This team, like I said, gave me joy because they were about all the right things. If you want to put a contest together about good human beings, we'll win. There's no question what this group will be in life. As a coach, that's why I got in this. Am I competitive? Does today stink? It hurts. My gut hurts so bad right now that I feel for all of them.

But I'm also excited about the joy that we brought a lot of people in this run. We've got Illinois back to a level that they're in Final Fours again, and my God, as long as I'm the ball coach, I'd better not take 21 damned years to get back there.

We've got great people. We've got great support. For that, I'll reflect at some time -- today is not a very good time to ask me that. But I'll reflect on what we're doing. I feel sad. I'm sad. If you want to know the truth, I'm sad.

But I'll reflect on some of the other stuff later. Seasons coming to an end stink because I'm going to steal a quote from Kelvin Sampson. I may not be as big a part of their life, but they are my life, and I'm sad.

Q. As long as you banged away at this career, and more recently you've talked about explicitly talked about wanting to get to the Final Four, now that you have and have lost and you're sad and all that, the experience, has it informed any nuance to the way you feel now that --

BRAD UNDERWOOD: No.

Q. -- that you can only feel having been here?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You know the beauty of this thing is I've had some unbelievable stops along the way in Dodge City, Kansas; Macomb, Illinois; Daytona Beach, Florida; Kansas State; South Carolina; Nacogdoches,



Texas; Stillwater, Oklahoma; and here. The one thing that -- if you guys don't know me, I'm about relationships. If anybody remembers me for wins and losses, then I didn't do a very good job as a human being.

The one thing this did for me was bring a lot of people who I haven't talked to reached out, and there's a lot of people here supporting me and my family. That's what this experience is about for me. For that group of guys in there, that's a lifetime memory, and I couldn't be more excited about that.

If you want to criticize me as a coach, criticize me, but as a human being, this was one of the most joyful and unbelievable events of all time, and my hats off to Indianapolis, my hats off to the city and the NCAA for the job they do because they make this a special experience even though we lost today.

Q. Tomislav talked about what it was like to see some shots that they made all season not go in today. Curious as a coach what do you tell them in those moments when you're seeing the sequence where Stojakovic misses a lay-up, Ivistic grabs it, puts it right back up, and both of them rim out. What can you tell them in that moment?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Keep doing it. You can't get better shots than that. Just keep doing it. That was my message at halftime. Keep shooting those shots. We couldn't get better shots. We couldn't get -- you can't get point-blank lay-ups and yet everything we do in our program is to try to fight -- and I thought we fought. We held them to 35 percent. They just made more threes than we did. Just keep fighting.

Like you said, I love the shots we're getting, I loved the opportunities. Today for whatever reason the lid was on it. My hats off to them. They made theirs.

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