

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Morehead State vs Illinois

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CHI Health Center

Illinois Fighting Illini Head Coach Brad Underwood Quincy Guerrier Marcus Domask Coleman Hawkins

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have Coleman Hawkins, Marcus Domask, and Quincy Guerrier. We're going to go right to questions.

Q. I know first time in the NCAA Tournament, Marcus. Part of the reason you wanted to come here is to play in this. What's it mean to get here, and what's it mean to play here?

MARCUS DOMASK: It's exciting. I came to Illinois to play in big games in March, and we're here, and we have a chance to win big games. It's exciting, and we're just focused on getting a win.

Q. Quincy, I know you want to get back to the NCAA Tournament. What's led you guys to this point, and what's it mean to get back here?

QUINCY GUERRIER: It feels great. Like he just said, last time I came here was my sophomore year. Really just grateful for the opportunity. We're ready to roll for tomorrow.

Q. Coleman, I remember talking to you last year after the loss in Des Moines. You said a lot of these guys want to come back this year to get to this point. How important was that to kind of see it solidified with what you guys have been able to do this year?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: It's just been good to see our



growth. We've been able to put some things behind us, and the guys who wanted to stay have stayed, and we've grown.

We've gotten better. We've gotten more mature. I think we're ready to take on any challenge that comes our way. I think the difference between this year and last year is we got guys that are grateful to be here and guys that really want to be here, and we're only focused on winning. So that's our goal to go into this tournament and whoever we face every night go out and try to win, so...

Q. Coleman, just want to pick up on what you just said. What was it like last year, and how much did what you allude to about how much people wanted to be with the Illini or not play into how it ended?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: Yeah. I mean, I think last year was kind of embarrassing for me. First round exit. It was definitely a game I felt like was winnable for us, but we just didn't compete hard.

It felt like some of the guys gave up, but I feel like we have a really good team this year that's ready to face any challenge, take on any challenge. We're ready to compete.

I feel like the difference between this team and last year's team is no one is ready to go home. We're ready to keep playing. I'm excited to see what we do this March.

Q. Coleman or any of you guys really, you missed Terrence for a few games early in the season. You got through that. How much -- how difficult was that, and how do you think he's handling this? Obviously we can't talk to him, but how is he handle this whole situation being in the spotlight and what he means to this team?

MARCUS DOMASK: Missing Terrence was tough for our team. He's such a big part of what we do, but I think it kind of gave all of us a chance to do a little more, and we all got more confidence because we had to adapt our roles.

As far as Terrence, I think he's doing well. He's focused on basketball. He's focused on trying to get a win. I think that's just what we're all here. We're all just focusing on trying to get a win.



QUINCY GUERRIER: Yeah, like Marcus just said, Terrence is really grateful to be back with us. He's been tremendous for us. He's just ready to win.

Everybody is locked in. We know why we're here, and we'll be ready to roll tomorrow.

Q. Coleman, just following up, what gives you confidence in this team entering this tournament?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: I feel like offensively we have guys who can score and create. I feel like we reached into another example of our defense when we started to switch in that Nebraska game and we did a little bit in the Wisconsin game.

I feel like we're able to grow in certain areas when the timing is right, and I feel like we can adjust well to those changes.

I think it was pretty evident to what happened in the Big Ten Tournament, but I feel like there's a whole other level that we can tap into as well. I don't think I played very good in the tournament. I thought I could have been a lot better.

I feel like there were spots where we could have played a lot better. I think this tournament gives us a chance to clean those things up and go out and compete hard.

Yeah, I just feel confident in everything that we do. I trust in all the work that we've done. Like we said all year, this team is really connected, so...

Q. For any of you, winning the Big Ten Tournament is great, but you had to do it coming from behind in every game double digits. You started well. How important is it to sustain throughout the 40 minutes and not have those lulls where you have to fight back and hopefully win it at the end?

THE MODERATOR: Quincy and then Marcus, please.

QUINCY GUERRIER: It just shows how connected we are. Every game in March is going to be similar to what we've been facing in the tournament. We just have to stay together, connected, and we really are a mature team. Everybody is old, and the fact that we're connected, I don't think it will matter. We just have to obviously clean some stuff up, like Coleman said, but we'll be ready.

MARCUS DOMASK: Yeah, obviously we don't like to get down double digits, but I think if there's one thing about this team is just we're going to keep fighting no matter how we

start, no matter what the middle looks like. At the end we're going to fight.

Just our ability to come together during time-outs and continue to push through no matter what's going on, I think that's what this team has, and that's what could give us some wins here.

Q. This is for Quincy and Coleman. Kind of different questions for each, but both in regard to the fans. Quincy, Oregon, Syracuse. I'm sure engaged fan bases. I'm thinking maybe Syracuse, you know, more impatient or something like that. How are Illinois fans in your experience in the year different? Are they even more amped up? For Coleman, you've had the whole gambit of experience with these fans. They have high expectations of you. Sometimes they, from my view, are hard on you. I want to know what that's like for you.

QUINCY GUERRIER: Our fans have been great all year long. I mean, in my experience, like you just said, I went to Oregon and Syracuse. The fan base was different, but here I really feel like they are supporting us a lot.

We have probably the best fans in the country. That's my response for the answer to your question.

COLEMAN HAWKINS: Me personally, I feel like I've dealt with the ups and downs of being on the good side and bad side of fans, but I feel like if any fan has anything negative to say about us, I mean, can they really call themselves a fan?

I feel like they're more of a spectator of Illinois basketball. I feel like the real fans support us in spite of whatever opinions they have. I feel like we have a really strong fan base that really does care about us who really supports us.

But I've been on both sides of whether they're fans or not. I have been on both sides of positive and negative things, and I think the biggest thing is to not let either positive or negative things go to your head because you might think too highly of yourself, and then as soon as you have a bad game, they turn on you.

I think the real fans are great. The ones that support us, they're a special group for sure. When they're loving and supporting, there's nobody like it in the country. I really appreciate all of them.

THE MODERATOR: The Head Coach of the fighting Illini Brad Underwood is with us. We'll ask you to make a statement on your team about being here in Omaha and then we'll go to questions. Brad, please.



BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, it's terrific to be here. There's nothing better than the NCAA Tournament. There's nothing better than hearing your name called on Selection Sunday.

I'm excited to be here with this group. I think we're coming into this tournament obviously off the Big Ten Championship and feel like it's different than in the last few years.

This group is very healthy. We're playing our best basketball. I feel like we're whole, which is something that through the course of a long season there's always ups and downs and trials and tribulations and so on, sickness, injuries, whatever. You have to deal with that.

I think we're in a very good place injury-wise. I think we're in a very good place with sickness and all that. We had three kind of different games in the Big Ten Tournament. The first day we didn't play very well and found a way to win. I love that resilient mentality. I think you've got to have that as you move into the NCAA Tournament.

It was probably not my favorite to be down double digits three times, but I think we found a way to persevere through some of those tough moments.

Obviously we've got Terrence Shannon had a phenomenal tournament and played great. Marcus Domask really after the first night was close to triple-doubles and played great.

Omaha, I've been in this venue one other time in the NCAA Tournament back when I was an assistant at Kansas State. It's one of the great basketball cities, great venues. We're really, really excited to be here.

We've got a great challenge tomorrow against Morehead State, a team that's playing awfully well. Earned the right to be here. Extremely well-coached and got a lot of respect for their program.

Q. You had mentioned Terrence and the Big Ten Tournament. I know he has had some pretty good stretches during the season, but had you seen him play three straight games at that level?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: He is becoming more consistent as a player. I think the one thing that's -- to answer your question, no, and not at that -- not at 40 points, 34. He's had some individually big games, but it was called upon for him to do that.

He's becoming very consistent. He's been with us a second year. The NBA process was great for him. He

listened, and he went to work on things that were -- they thought were issues with his game, so he has gotten better.

He is doing what great players do in big moments, and that's rise to the occasion. That was special watching that, and the 40-point game was very organic. We don't run a ton for him. I just looked at the box score at the end of the game, and I was, like, oh, wow, he's got -- he had a night. He did it in all different facets of play with the threes, with transition, getting to the foul line. Very efficient.

Q. Sencire Harris, played every game last year and comes in this year redshirting. What have you seen out of him and just how he has approached and handled his new role this year?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: He's a big reason we're as prepared as we are. He's with the scout team. Nobody talks more trash, nobody is more competitive, nobody fights more in practice. He guards Terrence a lot in practice, but his work ethic, very unselfish on his part to want to redshirt. That was him wanting to do that. Get bigger, get stronger. He's lived with our strength coach. He's been in the gym every single day for workouts working on his jump shot.

We see a much improved player, but we also see one that helps make the guys that are playing better every day.

Q. You've had a lot of success at Illinois. You've got a couple of Big Ten Championships, a lot of wins, but the NCAA Tournament has been tough. Rightfully so. There's a lot of good teams here. How does this team sustain a run this year knowing history and last year's first round loss?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: They don't know history. They don't know. That's only because you guys talk about it. This is a new group, a veteran group. It's one game at a time. It's every day at a time. We have this saying, "Every day, guys."

I think every great program there's been a ton of them that have ups and downs in the tournament. One of the reasons I like this group is we're healthy, and that's a big thing going into the NCAA Tournament and postseason play and sustain any type of run. It's one game at a time. I think you have to understand the abruptness of the end.

I think this group is old, and they truly understand that.

Q. Part of the season early on when you didn't have Terrence, players kind of learned how to win without him, and then he came back obviously to a better



team. If he hadn't come back do you think you would still be in this position, or was he just that important to the overall team?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think it helped us in a certain sense, but we found -- we were finding our identity right about then, especially on the offensive side. Yet, we continued to flourish.

I think we went into a shock a little bit our first road game at Purdue without him. There was a sense of swagger that he gave us. We were down 20-4, I think.

From that point on I think we got better. Then it's been since he's been back it was just reinstating and him kind of fitting in. He knew that we were playing well, so it's made us better along the way.

Q. Thinking of that Chattanooga game a couple of years ago and how it was a one-point game. Obviously you remember. But how difficult it could be at times for that team to score. Then this team, like the blitzes in Minneapolis, it's just so different. How much of that, if any of it, was you feeling like we've got to be able to go on runs and just score and score to do better at the end of the season? Was that a conscious thing?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yes.

Q. You wanted to turn that up?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I don't want to make too much out of it with that team. Trent had pink eye, and we were without Jacob Grandison with the shoulder injury. Those were two big guys that helped initiate offense.

Yeah, I think the ability to adjust has always been -- as you move into postseason play, has always been something that was a challenge for us. As great as Kofi was, there were some of those limitations in terms of what we could do at both ends of the court, and he was dominant.

Being able to have versatility, multiple guys do multiple things, score the basketball from a lot of different ways, I think we proved that this weekend we could do that. We'll see. It seemed to be pretty good for a lot of teams in postseason play.

Q. Two, three years ago, whenever it was, the Kofi team that was a 1 seed. You look at the regular season or the seeding, and you would think that that was your best Illinois team. But the way this team can erupt, is this team better equipped for the tournament even, or is this sort of maybe your team with the best shot do

you feel like going in?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We're getting ready to find out. I like this team. I do. For a lot of different reasons other than that.

I just think there's a lot of versatility with this group. Our bench is productive. We don't win the Big Ten Tournament without Dain. I thought we were -- Luke Goode is healthy now. I think we have a lot of ability to do different things, which we didn't then.

Now, that team was great. You have two All-Americans there. Just chose to have a bad day and had a bad day, but again, we'll see. We'll see. I like where this group is going, though.

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