

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

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Fiserv Forum

Illinois Fightin' Illini Coach Brad Underwood

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Joined by Illinois head coach Brad Underwood. Questions, please.

Q. How important is transition defense going to be in a game like this where they can get up and get going?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's one of the things that they do exceptionally well. I think we've seen a couple teams in our conference, Wisconsin, Iowa, that are both very, very similar in terms of, especially after a make, putting a ton of pressure on your defense. They shoot the first open 3, so it's very, very important that that happens and we're very conscious of their guys running and their guys pushing.

Q. Brad, you were pretty eager after the Maryland game to get back and practice. How many did you have? What were they like? How did it leave you feeling?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: What day did we lose? Friday? Thursday, Friday?

Q. Friday.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Off Saturday. Practiced Sunday, Monday. Very good. Very hard. Very intense.

Off Tuesday with -- not totally off. We're on spring break, but we didn't practice. We had shooting, stretching, weight room and a lot of that on Tuesday.

Wednesday morning, before we came here, we had a good one. And then today.

So been focused. Best thing that came out of the Maryland butt-kickin' was Morez Johnson got a lot of minutes and got to kick the rust off. So we've been able to get back to practice. They've been really good.

Q. I don't know exactly the numbers on it, but basically almost every year one of these First Four teams that wins, wins another one. Several years in a row. Do you think there's a rhyme or reason to that? Is it maybe an advantage to play, you know, and then play a couple days later? Have you looked into it at all?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I don't know. Alabama State -- I just walked in -- is playing the heck out of Auburn right now. It's a one-point game at half, maybe.

I don't know. I don't think it's a disadvantage to play. I think you've got your practices in. You know who you are. We've had 102 practices this year. So I think everybody's pretty eager. I think there's an excitement level here that's pretty cool. I don't have a reason for it. I wouldn't know. It's first time we've faced a team that's been in the First Four.

But, yeah, that was a heck of a game last night and two really, really good basketball teams. Xavier did what they did. They just kind of walked them down at the end.

Q. Brad, six straight tourney appearances if you count back to the COVID year. Your thoughts on what that means for you and the program.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: A lot. It's really hard to do. Getting to postseason play is not easy. I sure don't take it for granted. Selection Sunday is my -- my wife will probably get upset. It's my favorite day of the year other than my anniversary and kids' birthdays.

It's hard to do. It's something you sure don't take for granted. I look at our conference this year, and I think top to bottom, it's as good as it's ever been in my eight years.

Great staff, great support. There's a lot of things that go into that. I'm pretty blessed that we've had a lot of things and a lot of really good people help us along the way.

Q. Brad, you obviously know your team very well, but seeing that you have slightly more than a day to prepare for a team that you didn't know your match-up, does that create any problems?



BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's different. It was very different, but it's something we've done a lot this year. We backed off -- we'd been a team in the past -- to be very honest, in past years have been a big two-day prep team. We got away from that this year. We've done a lot more one-day preps in terms of what we've gone over with our players, not giving them too much information.

I felt like a little bit in the past we've killed them with numbers and too much information sometimes, so we backed off that. So it's not tremendously different. The one thing that it forced our coaching staff to do, and what we did, is I've watched three or four games on both. Then we tried to find similarities that we could talk about in practice. Worked on it from that standpoint.

I'd be lying if I said we didn't cover a little bit of Texas and a little bit of Xavier's stuff in practice. We just never told our guys what was what. We just covered their actions.

Q. Coach, you talked earlier in the past about getting your team to up the urgency of the end, the abruptness of the end. With players like KJ, Tomislav, who haven't played in the NCAA Tournament and aren't as familiar with it, how do you go about getting them to understand the event and not stressing them out and getting them to focus on the game at hand?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: The good thing for those guys, they've been in a lot of big games. They've got kind of a worldly knowledge and understanding.

This stage is different. It's unmatched. There's nothing like the NCAA Tournament. But it's still basketball, and you've got to go out and play the game, and you've got to compete.

The one thing that I've tried to reiterate to these guys is the other team is going to compete just as hard as you do and try to do it a little bit harder. And you just can't let that happen.

It's the beauty of this tournament. You're a little bit off, and you go home. Everybody's good. Every opponent's a challenge. You've got to go play well. I think our guys understand that. I think it's why we've tried to play the best schedule that we can possibly put together so these guys are hardened a little bit.

We've been on big stages, and we've been pretty solid in that so I think we'll rise to that challenge.

Q. There were enough good games, great segments of games, from Will Riley late in the season that it made

me think, well, he's somebody to watch for the tournament.

Is that how you --

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I agree, 100 percent. 100 percent. He's gifted. He's got a gift. That doesn't mean that he's going to go out and do that, but I believe in him. I think that you don't do what he did in the first half at East Lansing. Unfortunately, he got sick in the second half and then missed the next game.

He's had some unbelievable moments. He's become a guy that we truly believe gives us that third facilitator, along with KJ, and maybe a fourth with -- you know, because Tommy's been so big for us.

He's making great decisions. I call him slippery. He's just slippery. He gets where he wants to go. He forces help, and he's making great decisions and elevating his teammates. He shoots it from 3. He scores it at the rim. He scores it off the bounce.

He's got a lot of tools and I truly hope that you're right and that I'm right as well because I really have a feeling that he could be a huge player in this tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Good luck tomorrow night.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Appreciate it.

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