

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Fiserv Forum

Illinois Fightin' Illini

Brad Underwood

Will Riley

Tomislav Ivisic

Kylan Boswell

Media Conference

Illinois 86, Xavier 73

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to start with a statement from Illinois coach.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, that was about everything we thought it would be in the NCAA tournament against a really well-coached, very good and very hot team coming in in Xavier. Sean does an incredible job.

I thought the defense by Bam here, by Kylan on Conwell was a big part in terms of the difference of the ballgame. He was 3 of 10, 1 of 5 from the three. Really one of the most gifted players offensively in this tournament. Then I thought we did a really nice job on Freemantle. Tommy held him 2 of 9, 1 of 4 from three, to five points. Those are their two leading scorers. I thought defensively we were very, very good led by those two guys.

Kasparas was one rebound away from a triple-double. I thought he was outstanding. As well as these three guys. I was told Tommy set a record, NCAA tournament record, for most threes made by a 7-footer. Pretty good little stat there.

We beat a good basketball team. Will got going in the second half. He's 8 of 12. He smoked two layups in the first half or he'd have had a really, really good night.

We had an answer for everything, every time they made a run. We were good enough to get that thing up to 15 or 16 and held on.



THE MODERATOR: Questions for the Illinois student-athletes, please.

Q. Will, what was the difference for you in the second half? What was your mindset at halftime?

WILL RILEY: I just felt like I started off slow. I knew my team needed me in the second half. I just picked things up, just really locked in on my role. I completed it.

Q. Will, first NCAA tournament game for a lot of you guys. What made you ready for this moment?

WILL RILEY: Honestly, our vets for sure. They helped us prepare for it. I had no idea what it would be like coming into it. It was crazy. It was more than I imagined, for sure. These guys definitely help us get through it, carried us through the way.

Q. Kylan, growing up in Champaign, what does this mean for you to represent your hometown team in the NCAA Tournament?

KYLAN BOSWELL: It means everything for me, having my family here watching me in my hometown jersey playing in my third time going around in March Madness. Playing for Coach Underwood, playing with all these guys, it's been a blessing. Really glad I made the decision to come here. It means so much to me.

Q. Kylan, when Xavier cut the lead down to eight, I saw you put the hand out, "slow down." What was the message to get the lead back?

KYLAN BOSWELL: No silly turnovers, no bad shots. Really mature team, so they're going to capitalize on mistakes that we make.

For us, I know in that moment we need to slow things down, get the best look. If that means wasting the shot, shooting less, whatever the case may be, so be it.

In our offense, we are always moving, getting into next actions. So as always trusting that. Yeah, in that moment definitely need to slow the ball town, yeah.



Q. Tommy and Kylan, you've won five of six here. How do you feel you've gelled in these last three, four weeks?

KYLAN BOSWELL: I mean, like after the Duke game, came together, got back in the lab, put everything together. I think our practice has been the biggest thing for us, getting in and coming in and focusing on the little details, efforts and energy, especially today. I think we did a great job of that on the defensive end, focused on the scouting report, things like that. That's the way to answer, just for sure.

TOMISLAV IVISIC: I would say exactly like Kylan said, after Maryland game just be focused on little details, forget about that game, focus on the next one. To be mentally focused every game, every next game. Just to be ready to win.

Q. If you could go back to whenever it was during the season when you weren't playing that much, whatever you were struggling with, physicality, maybe you can say, but from that time, the second half tonight, how big of a gulf is there between how you felt then about yourself, what you could do, and how you felt out there tonight?

WILL RILEY: Honestly, I feel like it's definitely a big confidence thing coming into it. My mindset wasn't right throughout that little gap. I was just playing with my head down. Now I know my role, I know what Coach wants of me. I just established that. I played the way that these guys want me to play.

Q. Kylan, you have a bunch of guys, Will, Tommy, K.J. Morez, young guys who have never been through this before. What does it say about them coming out and performing on this stage?

KYLAN BOSWELL: That's why you come to Illinois. They've done a great job all year. They're just doing exactly what they've been doing all year, what we see in practice each and every day. They step up to the plate, when the moment gets bright, they're ready for that moment.

Proud of each and every one of them. Glad they have the self-confidence for themselves.

Q. Kylan, how would you describe yourself as a player, especially coming out of that first half?

KYLAN BOSWELL: I'm the dude that I'll do whatever I need to do to help us win. If that's guard the best guy, facilitate for my team, knock down the open shot. Feel like

I'm very versatile. Especially on this team, Coach always puts me in the positions to be my best. Just trying to help the team win at all times.

Q. Tommy, looking at Sunday you play Kentucky, where your brother played. Any extra incentive in that game?

TOMISLAV IVISIC: Yeah, I hope it is going to be a fun game. My brother played there last year. He told me all the best things about Kentucky. He had a great time there. I'm looking forward to play that game.

Q. Will, you played a really good game tonight. What's going through your mind right now as Illinois advances to the second round?

WILL RILEY: Honestly, I'm just super excited we get this opportunity. I know we're going to go on a run. We're just super excited to get into this game.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thanks. Good luck on Sunday.

Questions for Coach, please.

Q. Kylan, seemed like tonight he made every play. Just want you to speak to that.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's what he does. It's what he does. Tough as heck. You go chase Conwell around for 40 minutes, the amount of running, then come down and be effective on the offensive end.

He's tough. He's gritty. He's strong. He's a veteran. He's got a winning mindset. That rubs off. Can't say enough positive things about Kylan.

Q. Wondering what you thought of your team coming into this game and what you saw from them.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Said it all year, I think we've got a really, really high ceiling. I think those guys had an opportunity to show themselves a little bit tonight. Yeah, we did a lot of really good things. Defensive rebounding, we won the rebounding battle by 20. That's who we've been all year. It's nice to go 18 of 18 from the free-throw line, as well.

But I thought we made plays. I'll be honest, I was scared to death. Watching them against Texas the other night, knowing how hot they were, what they were doing shooting the basketball. They were leading the country in the last six games from three.

So really proud of this group. Really, really excited for their



performance. Now we've got an opportunity to try to go do it again.

Q. In the second half you really slowed down their three-point shooting, made them shoot twos. What was the adjustment you made at halftime to defend that?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We lost 'em on three plays in the first half. We got cross-matched on one. Foster hit one. We gave Maddox a couple. We were really late oncoming off zoom action. We were good with Swain shooting it. I think he made four all year. He got a couple of lucky rolls for those to go in. We were really good with those.

But the hounding and the disruption. We wanted to make catches hard for Conwell. We wanted to make them hard month Maddox when he was in the game, just to disrupt their flow, try to get them out of rhythm.

I thought over the course of time we did a nice job of being disruptive.

Q. 44 points from freshmen tonight. Usually this tournament is all about veterans. What can you say about the maturity of your young guys tonight?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We're not freshmen anymore. These guys have been playing 30-plus minutes a game. I've said it all along, I like their ceiling because I know how talented they are.

The disruption in the middle of the season with the illnesses and everything else. You see how important Tommy is. Just passing it, rebounding it, defending it, being able to shoot it. We missed that.

Obviously Morez still working his way back, but he's been terrific. I'm ecstatic with the way those guys are performing, and they're truly not freshmen anymore.

Q. You said in a hype video back in November you felt like this team can go as far as it wants to go. After such a dominant second half tonight, what do you feel your team's seeding is going into this round of 32?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I just think you got to take every game for what it's worth. There's a different opponent. This one's going to be Kentucky. They're seeded ahead of us. We'll be an underdog in this one. We've got to go out and do things differently against them.

They all provide different challenges. But we've got to answer that no matter what it is.

Q. I see you got one guy from the hometown up on dais, another guy from Croatia, a Canadian, Lithuanian. To have this diversity of culture, how important is that to keep the locker room together and have chemistry?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's been much easier, other than probably those guys cussing at me in their foreign language and I don't know what they're saying, which I'm sure that's happened a good amount (smiling). Especially from Tommy.

But this group loves basketball. They love to compete. This group rivals our group last year in terms of liking and caring for each other in the locker room.

It's genuinely a group that's happy when somebody else does something great. That's really hard to find.

So keeping 'em all on that page has been fun to be a part of. Even through all the adversity we went through. They're great human beings. They're great kids, they're smart. They love the game. They love to compete.

Q. What is it like to coach a team with high ceiling, but youth and everything, inconsistency, trying to get it to that maximum at this point of the year. What is that like from your perspective?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Fun, challenging, aggravating. I say that in a really positive way.

The aggravation has been just that we were -- we played the schedule we played for a reason. We didn't need any false pretense of who we were. We needed to get smacked by Alabama in the second game of the year. We needed to have those moments. We needed to not execute a side out of bounds play to beat Tennessee. All those things were growing moments.

The aggravation came when we had so many different things, mono, a broken wrist, the flu. It just stunted us because we couldn't practice to get better. That's what freshmen and young guys need, is that.

I'm excited that opportunity presented itself late in the year. We had two games in the last 15 days in league play. That gave us an opportunity to really practice.

Q. Will, 22 points tonight. I'm sure you're not surprised. Your thoughts on defense, how he impacted the game.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I mean, that's where his growth has been from the first day that he got here. I'm not

sure he could guard you in all honesty. Now he's a guy that's using his length, he's playing without fear. Had a couple of great blocks. He's anticipating better. He's understanding scouting reports better. All of that stuff is just growth.

He's a guy we ask a lot of on that end. He can do a lot of different things because of that length and his athleticism.

Q. This looked like vintage K.J. tonight. What do you see different from him when he has a performance like that rather than the downs he's had recently?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You know, I think he played happy. I think he played like he enjoys this moment. I think he enjoys this. Not to say that he wasn't, but I just saw a different glimmer about him the last couple days.

He's been a monster in practice. I've just seen a happy kid. He's 18 and a half. He's a kid. Just to see the fun and maybe the excitement of the NCAA Tournament is what it took.

But, man, he's been talking a hundred miles an hour. He's been busting my balls on everything, laughing. I mean, he's just having fun. I mean, that in a really good way.

Q. You spoke earlier about this group having a lot of connectiveness. How do you find that with bringing in new international kids, kids from the portal, high school kids as well?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We probably don't have enough time for that. We give personality tests. It's a big part of what we do. Character is something that we do a deep, deep dive into.

I don't want to coach guys that don't have high character. I'll put it that way. And guys that care about winning, guys that want to work. So we find a lot of common things together that way.

But there's a few more things involved in that, but that's one of the bases.

Q. You guys won by 30-something at Oregon, 20 at Michigan. I don't know what you'd say was the best you played at any point. The Tournament is different. Have you played better than this?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I thought probably not. I say this because I have so much respect for Sean, I have so much respect for how well they were playing.

I thought defensively we did a lot of really good things.

Anytime you win on the glass by 20. Have we had nights where we've probably been better offensively? Yeah. We've probably made a few more shots or whatever. But I thought the balance was great.

Maybe we turned it over a time or two, but I thought we were really solid tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Good luck Sunday.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Thank you.

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