

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Illinois vs Kentucky

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Fiserv Forum

Illinois Fightin' Illini Coach Brad Underwood

Media Conference



MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Underwood, please.

Q. Will Riley mentioned yesterday that he credited some of the performance of the freshmen. What have you seen specifically from Kylan and Tre and even Ty leading up to this weekend?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. I say it many times, when a head coach has to lead all the time, we're probably not going to be a very good team. When the players get to do that, it's really impactful. It means a lot to have experience. You know, Tre was an NCAA Tournament member. Kylan has been through it. And just the ups and downs of the season. And there's no perfect season. Every player is going to go through an up and down. Every team will. And just to have guys who have experienced that means a lot.

To Will's credit, he's a willing listener, because not everybody wants to hear that stuff all the time. But it works both ways.

Q. Brad, before you led this program, you were a follower of it. You were emotionally invested in it. So I wanted to throw back to the last time these two teams played each other in the tournament in 1984 and it led to that rule change in which no team could then host an NCAA Tournament on their home floor. Do you kind of remember that, much about it, opinions on it?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I don't. It's probably a really good rule. I think the game's grown kind of beyond that, even though you could probably find an argument. But I think the neutral site stuff has worked out pretty well.

Obviously must have been pretty impactful to create a rule change and do that. But I think that, again, television has just grown our game in so many different ways, and that's obviously one of them.

Q. I believe your top 3 scorers were all from outside the United States. You kind of touched on that last night. What was your strategy in terms of rebuilding this roster during the off season, and how were you able to kind of get those guys to come to Illinois?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. And truthfully the basketball world is a pretty small network of people. And it's not that big. And Kasparas, we've known about Kasparas for a couple of years. Even though he's from Lithuania, he's been in Barcelona and played on a big stage for a long time. And everybody knew about Tommy and his brother, the 7'1" twins.

It's a small world that way, and we've been -- we go over -- every month, every six weeks, we're somewhere in Europe, our staff. It fits our university. We have a very diverse university with a lot of international students. I love coaching them. I think there's a maturity and a love for the game that I have great appreciation for.

And when we started building this team, a guy like Kasparas is very mature beyond his years. He's 18 years young, and yet he's 18 years old, and plays 30 sometimes with his maturity. Tommy has played against great players and they've all had moments where we practice or play against great guys. So we felt like there was an advantage from that side of things.

Will was a guy we saw late and he classed up, but he's got a special gift. He's a very gifted offensive player, and we felt like it was a great opportunity for him with our strength and conditioning program and Adam Fletcher and the money we spend in nutrition for him to really develop. And they saw the same thing.

So we're continuing to recruit over there, and NIL has helped us be able to go get some of those top players and we'll continue to be involved in that market.

Q. I think after the Duke game, there was a feeling that a season could go a number of ways. I guess from your perspective, was there any fear that this group would roll over and if there wasn't, what does it say about this team?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: No. That's all you people that thought that and want to write about that. That's when you know your locker room. And, you know, you guys look at results. I look at what led up to all of that. And that was the perfect storm. The sicknesses, the injuries, the culmination of not being able to practice, having Tommy three practices in really a five-week period.

But I never doubted their character, their resilience, their want-to, and then it was -- you know, in hindsight. Maybe I wish I had made some of our defensive changes earlier, but I couldn't because we didn't have Tommy, and I didn't.

So I think everybody else wanted to write about all of that, but not for one second, did I ever doubt that. I knew we were the team that had played a lot of really quality opponents very well throughout the year and won a lot of games.

Q. Is it hard to identify that type of spirit and mentality in recruiting? I mean, I imagine -- you've talked a lot about how much these guys love basketball and how competitive they are. How do you evaluate that and know that you have a group that will be ready to get up off the mat over and over again?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, one, we personality test. So everybody that comes into our program, we're going to test them before that. But, again, it's a priority for us. Competitiveness, teamwork, willing to work, not afraid of it, those traits are really, really important to us. We probably turn down as many guys as we take because of the results of some of those things.

Willing to sacrifice, be a great teammate, all those things play into the recruiting process for us.

Q. Coach, Kylan at 19 you've pretty much asked him to stand up and kind of be that leader for the team. How have you seen him just embrace that specifically?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. He's not afraid. And leadership is hard and leadership is much, much harder today than it was years ago. Kids today they get locked on their phones and they don't do anything except stare at it. And sometimes they don't communicate.

Kylan is not afraid of that, and he's not afraid to tell teammates something sometimes that they don't want to hear. It took a little bit because he's going through it as well as a first-year guy, a learning curve. But now that he's comfortable -- and no one's ever doubted Kylan's want to win and his desire to win. And he puts in as much work as anybody and so he's a natural leader. He's got a lot of natural things that allow him to be a great communicator.

Q. One of the guys that maybe doesn't get as much attention as some of the scorers and flashier names is Morez. Do you feel he is an unsung hero? What does he do not just tangible, but what else does he give you that does not show up in a box score?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. In most years Morez as a freshmen in the BIG TEN, the year he had, would have had him up for all BIG TEN honors. This year's freshman class was spectacular in the league, and yet he's had his moments. He's been a consistent rebounder. He's been an elite defender. He's a guy that is not delusional. He's a guy that loves to listen and play, and he's gotten so much better.

And so his impact on our team was very, very evident when we didn't have him. And as we've been able to play better here of late, a lot of that is our veterans. We're growing up and now we get Morez back and it gives us a real chance to reach our ceiling.

Q. Kentucky rebuilt its entire roster during the off season. I think you have one guy back who played in the NCAA Tournament for yourselves last year. How much is that kind of a testament to just this era of college basketball? Is it a little easier now to rebuild on the fly if necessary?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. I was a junior college coach for a lot of years. So it's something I'm not familiar with. I think it's one of the things that -- especially in Kentucky in Mark's case, taking over a new job, I think that's probably going to be a lot of the norm in today's world with new opportunities and having to rebuild a roster.

But when I've got a storied program -- and Mark had success at BYU -- those things fall into place, and he's done a tremendous job of putting that roster together and finding a way to play that he's very comfortable coaching, and they're very good at it.

Q. So you brought Orlando back for a second go-around. What's that say about him and what's that say about you, that you were willing to bring him back?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah. I love O. And I call him the Goat. I mean, I think he's one of those guys that is unique. He's great for me. And I don't know if you want to call it a weakness or a strength, it's your choice, but sometimes I coach the glass half empty all the time. O is always half full. And that's really good for me. And he's got great perspective. He's a magnet for people. He's a tremendous communicator. I put tremendous value in that.

And I think one of the other things that doesn't go lightly with me, he makes me laugh. And he's always got a way about him. He's always in a good mood. Orlando never has a bad day. And I think there's tremendous value in that, and I have great appreciation for his knowledge of the game of basketball, but I also have tremendous value in who he is as a person and what he brings to me and my family and our program.

MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. Good luck tomorrow.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

