

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

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Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Coleman Hawkins

Ty Rodgers

Marcus Domask

Quincy Guerrier

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference



the same way. We're going to practice the same way. We're going to go about film the same way.

So it's no pressure for us. I feel confident. I feel comfortable. Yeah, just feels like we got another game and we're grateful to be here.

TY RODGERS: I agree with Coleman. I think it's another game and at the end of the day, we have to be ourselves and come to play and step up to that table and just accept the challenge.

Q. For Coleman and Marcus, this team appears to be having a lot of fun playing basketball right now. Has it been an enjoyable ride going back to day 1, last summer, or were there things the team had to fight through to get to this point?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: Yeah. I mean, right now I think we're having a lot of fun. I think it's been really fun just enjoying winning, the winning feeling, the attention that's been brought to us, and then the connection that we have.

And then just being able to wake up and play basketball another day. So I definitely think it's been a lot of fun. We have a fun group. We continue to have a lot of fun.

MARCUS DOMASK: I agree with Coleman. It's been a lot of fun. This ride has been a lot of fun, just hanging out with our teammates on and off the court. Everything that's a part of this, I think we just are enjoying being here. When the time's to lock in, we lock in. I think it's been a special ride and it's been a lot of fun so far. And we're not ready for it to end yet.

Q. Coleman and Marcus, maybe Coach, it's been about 25 years since the Big Ten has won a championship. Coach Izzo said a couple times it's important for the league to get another one.

Do you think there's anything stylistically or strategically about Big Ten play that puts the teams in trouble in the tournament and what would it mean to get one or two teams in the Final Four from the league this year?

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us. Coach, if you'd like to give a quick opening statement, we'll open it to questions after that.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, obviously, very excited to be in the Elite Eight. Hard-fought game last night against a great Iowa State team. I thought we persevered and found a way to get here.

Excited about the opportunity to play the defending national champions. Obviously, a very, very good basketball team. Danny's done a terrific job. But right where we want to be. Excited for the challenge. Got a great group of guys. To my right and to my left that have performed all season. We're a team that has experienced many challenges, done a lot of really positive things. Won a Big Ten championship tournament. We feel like we're playing our best and excited for the opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

Q. Coleman and Ty, you guys haven't been an underdog all that often. How do you feel about that, going up against the defending national champion, going for a Final Four?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: I feel like there's, like, no pressure on us. I feel like it's another game. We're going to prepare



COLEMAN HAWKINS: I don't think it's necessarily anything play style-wise. I haven't been in the league for 25 years, but I've been here for three or four. I don't know. I just feel like the years I've been here, we've had some really good teams. For, like, the years I've been here, we've probably been the best conference in the country.

At the end of the day, we talked about the seedings don't matter. It's whoever the best team is that night, and I guess the Big Ten just hasn't had a team that has been able to go out and win six games in a row.

MARCUS DOMASK: Yeah. As far as the 20, 25 years, that's more a question for him. I've only been here one year. So, yeah, I don't know why they haven't. I think we have a really good team and so we're just looking to change that ourselves.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I think we had -- the year we were 1 seed, I thought we were really good and had a bad day. I can't speak to anybody else's successes or disappointments in the tournament, but I felt like that team had as good an opportunity as anybody.

It's what makes this event so special is it's not a series. It's one game. If you don't play well, you go home. And that day Loyola was better than us. Prior to that, there's been a lot of good teams. It's been the best league in the country for a long time. Very passionate, great coaches.

But, yeah, it would be nice. I think everything is cyclical a little bit, and I hope we've got multiple teams in it this year.

Q. Marcus and Quincy, can you speak to the advantage of having a lineup with guys all 6'6" or taller, how that might help against UConn with their length and athleticism as well.

MARCUS DOMASK: UConn is a really good team so our size and versatility help us. They beat a lot of teams on the boards. They get a lot of second-chance points. So our size, we've got to play really physical and keep them off the boards to give ourselves a chance.

QUINCY GUERRIER: Like Marcus just said, we have to be physical, use our size, especially on the rebounding aspect of the game. They're really good offensive rebound team so we'll have to really match their physicality and be more physical than them.

Q. Brad, what has your prep looked like in anticipation of playing UConn? Now that you know you have them, how has it changed?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Well, it was early morning and it's

not overly complicated. They are who they are, we are who we are. It's a quick turn. Danny and those guys do an -- and his staff do an incredible job offensively. They run a lot of sets, nothing that we haven't seen throughout the course of Big Ten play and postseason.

We've got to guard it. We can't get too in-depth, but we've got to hammer home some of the important aspects we want to try to do on both end of the court. So we'll go to the practice court here. We'll be active in terms of covering some of those things, and it ultimately comes down to good players making plays in a game like this and then handling all the intangible things.

Q. A quick follow-up for the guys. Knowing you would have to go through UConn, how much have you watched their tournament run so far?

MARCUS DOMASK: I haven't watched their tournament run very much. I've watched a lot of games. Honestly, I watched the exciting games but they've been blowing out teams, so I haven't really followed much attention to them.

We'll be watching a lot of film. We have watched a lot of film. So we'll have a good understanding for what they do.

Q. This is for any of the players. Marcus, you said the other day that Coach, his approach is so professional. He treats you guys like a pro team. The video of Coach last night, the aggressiveness, the agility, the mobility --

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I appreciate that.

Q. Coach, I envy you, I couldn't run that fast if I was chasing a burger. When you think about the way he approaches that with a water gun, did you ever think you would be seeing these images when you were being recruited by him?

MARCUS DOMASK: I don't know if I thought I'd see the shirt off with the water gun. I don't think that was part of the recruiting process. But, yeah, I mean, you know, he gets the rep of being the hard-nosed guy. But on the inside, he's really kind of soft.

COLEMAN HAWKINS: Soft.

MARCUS DOMASK: He's kind of soft on the inside.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I've never been called that in my life, Marcus.

MARCUS DOMASK: But, yeah, part of this run is enjoying the moment. You've got to have fun. We play basketball

to have fun. We love the game. So enjoy the moments and be locked in when we've got to be locked in.

Q. Coach, can you reflect on where this is originating from? Did you ever think you would be doing this?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: If you knew the grief I caught from my two daughters last night. And Adam Fletcher, our strength coach, has been told he has to get busy with my ab workouts.

I truly just wanted to be dry and have something to wear when I had to come meet with you all. But, no, we celebrate winning. We talk about winning a lot. And winning's really hard. We ask these guys to work their tail off every day. It's our moniker. Every day, guys.

I don't want winning to ever, ever just be a relief. Like whew, next game. I don't want that. I want them to enjoy that moment. For whatever it is, 30 minutes, whatever it is.

Our strength coach, our staff have kind of come up with some different ideas. It's fun. They're dragging me along for an unbelievable ride. I mean, this makes you never want to quit coaching. It's not the winning. It's who they are. Every one of these guys is a comedian in their own right. Yet, we know when to flip the switch.

Yeah, they've got a 60-year-old man taking his shirt off and doing his best dad bod. So probably not very good, not very easy to look at.

Q. When you guys left the press conference the other night, you did something with the chairs. What was that? Is that a superstition or is there a metaphor for it or something like that? Marcus?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's these two guys. These two guys got the chair game going.

Q. What's that all about?

MARCUS DOMASK: We just want to be respectful human beings and push in our chairs.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's a great answer.

COLEMAN HAWKINS: You see something? We just pushed in our chairs, right?

MARCUS DOMASK: We just want to be respectful.

Q. Coach, you talked about the challenges you guys have faced this season. Obviously, the one with Terrence is a unique one. How much has having such

a veteran group helped everyone navigate the path this season to get to this point?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, the season's a roller coaster. And it's obviously Terrence's situation, we've had injuries. We've played start of the year where Coleman missed three or four games. You deal with illness. It's a roller coaster that covers many, many months. This group's maturity, their connectivity, I use that word a lot, has allowed us to be strong, grow stronger, persevere, come together more, enjoy the challenges through all of that, whether it was Nico breaking his foot or Amani's back injury, Coleman's knee, the sicknesses we've had.

It just brings you all together. And through that is tremendous growth and connectivity that's developed here.

Q. Coleman and Brad, you had a daunting nonconference schedule. Played Purdue a couple times, Tennessee.

Is there anything about those games that prepare you for a team like UConn?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: Yeah, I think those are two teams that we lost to, and I feel like all three of those games that we played, they were really good teams but I feel like we could have won. So I feel like we were able to learn from our mistakes, and I feel like it definitely gave us a sense of what a feel for the NCAA Tournament would be like. Really high level, competitive games. Great defensive teams.

With Purdue, getting out in transition, scoring the ball, guarding their actions. Those are two teams that are really good teams. So I definitely think it was just a learning experience for us, and we were able to learn from mistakes and definitely did prepare us for these moments for sure.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: You play the best to get ready to play the best. Again, we've never run away from scheduling at Illinois. We're always going to play really, really good people. We're going to challenge ourselves on the road, as we did with Tennessee. Game that could have gone either way. Again, I think this team is has grown a great deal since those games. We're a rebound away against Purdue in a hard-fought game, which was our last lot.

UConn is terrific, and they're right up there with the best teams we've played. But we've seen them all in the Big Ten as well, and we're excited for the opportunity.

Q. Quincy, you played against UConn last year, if I'm not mistaken, out in Portland. You were on a different



team, they have a lot of different guys. Anything you can take from that game going into tomorrow night as far as what you know about UConn?

QUINCY GUERRIER: They were a really good team. I think we lost that game by 20 or 30. But they're a great team. Their offense is really good. They play good defensively too. Like Coach said, we've got to be focused on our game, how we've been defend ing. We're going to have to be really physical with them defensively and take care of defensive rebounds so we can push in transition.

It's all about us.

THE MODERATOR: Coleman, Ty, Marcus, Quincy, you guys can head back. Thanks so much. Appreciate it.

Questions for Coach?

Q. Various coaches through the years have offered the idea that the regional final, the Elite Eight, is the toughest game, the hardest game, the most pressure-packed game of the tournament to get through.

I was wondering if, in your experiences or conversations, if you had any thoughts on that idea.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I've been in one when I was at Kansas State. It was Butler's first trip to the Final Four. I don't know about that. I think they're all -- I think the opening game can be really, really hard.

None of them are easy. You've got to be prepared. I think there's a sense, I could see where some people think there's a sense of relief to get to a Final Four. But, yeah, everybody's got to challenge their quick turns. You've got to flip the script mentally. It's still an unbelievable opportunity to do something great, and we're one of eight that are still standing with an opportunity to go to Arizona.

Q. Coach, you get to this level or this in the tournament, it seems like all the games turn into possession games late. Do you find yourself calling more plays, dialing in more plays from the bench rather than letting the ball find Marcus or find Terrence?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: In certain situations. You know, I think that we understand that we try to -- in league play, we tell our team 75 percent of all games are going to be two possessions. So we try to prepare for those and have ideas. Every game has a different identity to it.

Last night was no different. But we're going to try to go to

a match-up. We went to Dain quite a bit with T.J. on the bench with fouls. I don't worry as much about the offensive end as I do the defensive end. Sometimes, it can get fairly complex in terms of the chess game that you play in late game situations.

Q. What makes UConn so unique and show challenging?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Really good players and they're really well coached. I mean, it's really -- and the fact that they -- their point guard got six offensive rebounds yesterday. They punish you on the glass. We try to do the same thing. We try to make you hurt on the offensive glass.

They run in transition. They get a ton of threes in transition. We love to run in transition. We love to score under seven seconds. So it's some mirroring styles. I've got tremendous respect for how hard they play.

They've got a little bit of everything in terms of Castle being an elite defender, Karaban at 6'8", 6'9", is just a deadly three-point shooter and especially in transition.

So they've got size and they play really fast and they play really hard.

Q. I just wanted your impression of Steph Castle. He's a freshman kind of making an impact on a lot of older teams these days?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: He's not kind of making an impact. He's making a big impact. He's an elite defender. Elite. He competes really hard. It's very hard to find freshmen that play that hard, that know how to play that hard.

Usually, they've been coddled and told how great they are for the first six years of their being in basketball, so they think they're great and arrived. That one knows how to play really, really hard. He's a great slasher. His offensive game is developing, but he's impactful.

The job he did on Boo Buie from our league in the NCAA Tournament game was very impressive. Just really impressed with him. Danny's got him playing so hard, and that's impressive for a freshman.

Q. Seems like your team is pretty uptight and nervous for this game tomorrow.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We are. We are jittery.

Q. What's the value of having a team that's this loose? Doesn't seem like the moment is going to be too much



for them.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Age, old, maturity. I mean Marcus is a 2,000 point scorer. Quincy's played in 160 games. There's nothing that they haven't seen. The question was asked, Quincy's seen UConn.

There's just some value in that. It's not like you're running a bunch of young guys who don't know what they're going to do. I know what this group's going to do. I know how they're going to react.

We've been through the trials and tribulations of a long season so you gain confidence from that. But Coleman's been four years. Ty's in his second. The other two guys are transfers with tons of experience. So they've won me over.

They're all very, very, very, very competitive.

Q. Brad, when you say you've been through the trials and tribulations, what's a trial where every coach experiences one of those with their team, if not a couple of those, where you were most impressed with how this group responded and perhaps --

BRAD UNDERWOOD: That's easy. That's easy. That's easy. Penn State. At Penn State. We were just -- we'd prepared terribly for multiple days for that game. And not knocking them. They moved the game into their old arena. It was a sellout crowd. It was amped. And we didn't play very well but had a ten-point lead and literally watched it just disintegrate in 30 seconds.

And bad plays, dumb plays, bad fouls. You name it, we did it. And I didn't have to go into the locker room and say a word. I was calm. I was -- they knew, but they also knew I was going to get things right.

The next day or two weren't fun for them, but they were get-right moments, and that's been a defining moment all year because this group knew. They knew. They knew. They knew the preparation leading into it. We didn't deserve to win that game, and we tricked it off.

Q. You mentioned the experience that your players have and UConn's obviously coming off a National Championship. With the portal, how hard is it now to kind of build a team that, if you look at them, they can just come back and say let's try it again, let's run it back, to not just have one year but have a run of success?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: He's got a great staff. I think we do too. I think we've had -- we've found success in the

portal and at a very, very high level based on character. Based on not just talent. I think it's character, and I think that you look at Spencer. Character. Tough. They fit. Their staff has done an incredible job of evaluating the guys that fit them.

They've also done it with really good recruiting. We've got great carryover in our program. So we've added the right pieces. But it's got to be the right mesh. In our case, it's been about, yeah, they got to be good, but it's the right character pieces.

Those two guys and Justin Harmon have been great in fitting in.

Q. This run Terrence has been on, 25 or more points in the last seven games, have you seen anything like this in your time as a coach?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I was an assistant with Michael Beasley. Mike was pretty good. But he's doing it, and we don't run much to him. We're not running a lot of action to him. Marcus gets a ton of the attention. Coleman gets a ton of the attention in terms of offensive stuff. I've used the term "organic." It kind of happens. He finds it.

But he's been great all year. He was great early and, like you said, he had a few struggles on his return. That was just him not wanting to mess things up. But, yeah, he had 29 last night. I didn't know it. He played 29 minutes and missed five free throws and some wide open threes. Otherwise, he could have had a 40-point night.

But he's a special player, special talent.

Q. In the big picture, college basketball has withstood plenty, right? We talked about it the other day, one-and-dones, NIL, transfer portal. How does it feel that gambling has become such a ubiquitous presence in the game, something that used to be so taboo. If it bothers you, if it concerns you what a big part it's become in the college game and sports in general.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Concerns me a lot. Concerns me a lot. We have one of the greatest games and the competitive integrity -- I use that word a lot -- can never be challenged.

I'm so much in favor of what the NCAA is doing, Mr. Baker, in terms of coming out against prop betting. I think that's -- we in the Big Ten, our commissioner, our athletic directors, put in place this year injury reports before games. Huge.

So I think it's something we're always going to have to keep educating on. I think we're naive if we don't think it's

not happening everywhere. It is. We have to do our part to educate our young people. We have to continue to do everything we can to be preventive. We're not a pro franchise where we drive into buildings and drive into gated communities and nobody ever knows. We've got college kids wearing boots in dorms, you know, and being seen.

So I think we've got to be in the process of continual education. I know at the University of Illinois, we do it constantly, making our student-athletes aware of it.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you so much. Good luck tomorrow.

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