

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

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

UConn Huskies

Dan Hurley

Stephon Castle

Donovan Clingan

Cam Spencer

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

UConn 77, Illinois 52

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, gentlemen. Thank you for joining us. Coach Hurley, thoughts on tonight's victory. Thank you very much.

DAN HURLEY: You know, first off, just congratulations to Illinois on a championship season. They're a tremendous team. They're not going to win the National Championship, but they had a championship season, winning the Big Ten tournament. Just had an awesome year.

Obviously, we go into all these games believing that it's going to be a 40-minute battle to the end. But, again, we were able to systematically break them down in the second half there.

These guys are awesome.

Q. Dan, you're beating teams by 27.7 points in this tournament. You guys obviously had a great regular season, but you weren't this level of dominant where you're breaking teams' wills. Do you feel like you've taken the intensity up a notch in this tournament?

DAN HURLEY: Like I said in New York, the Big East is a monster. The Big East is a monster. Iron sharpens iron. Yeah, we didn't have -- I don't know what our record is the last two years in non-conference games, but we feel like once we get out of that league, which is as good as any league in the country, it was, in my estimation this year. It should have been a six-bid league. It was one of the two



best leagues in the country.

I just think the league prepares us for these nonconference games. It's like you hear -- I read a tweet last night, I think, from a former Illinois player, Sean Harrington, who's a good player, a McDonald's All-American. One of the staff members wanted to add a little more fuel to my fire, a little something. "UConn has not had to play against as physical a team and they've never seen someone like Terrence Shannon." Something along those lines.

Statements like that are just asinine. You're going against beasts and monsters every night in the Big East, and the Big East prepared us for teams like Illinois.

Q. Sorry if I misquoted him on that, but that's a rough -- that's what I took from it.

Congratulations on the win. Coach, what in the world did you tell these guys at halftime?

DAN HURLEY: I don't know what they were thinking, but we just had tremendous respect for Illinois. Brad and their program and the team, I obviously would have been thrilled just to get out of here with a win.

But our defense is elite. Our offense is elite. We rebound the ball. These guys play every possession like it's the end of the world. Kimani and Luke prepare these guys with scouts at a quality level that any head coach in the country would be proud to put forth. Those two guys are amazing.

We've got NBA-level players that are just willing to share and have created an unbelievable culture. We're going to be tough to beat.

Q. Donovan, awesome game. You established yourself inside very early. Guys like Stephon and Cam were able basically to do what they want inside. At what point did you realize you'd shoved them into a locker, could do whatever you wanted to them on the inside?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Really in the second half, the way we were moving the ball on offense and how we were



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playing for one another really just opened up opportunities to dominate in the post and find cutters cutting and getting open shots.

Just one thing about this team is we always play for the guy next to us. We're not worried about our stats. We're not worried about self. We're worried about the person next to us, worried about the team, and worried about walking out with a "W".

Q. Donovan, obviously, the significance of going to the Final Four, but how big is this for you personally, just doing it somewhat nearby home, on the floor of your favorite NBA team? Does it add a little extra to it?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Yeah, you know, I grew up dreaming of playing for the University of Connecticut. So to be able to wear this jersey every single day and play for such a historic and special program and insert myself and my teammates inserting themselves into history, it's special.

Everybody dreams of this as a young basketball player, and there's only a certain percentage of people that make it to this level. Don't take any moment for granted, go out, give it everything you've got, and I'm extremely blessed to be in this position.

Q. Terrence Shannon has 29 points Thursday night. Tonight, you guys held him to 8 points on 2-of-12 shooting. How do you game plan for a player like him to shut him down tonight?

DAN HURLEY: Well, Steph has the size. He's got the size. He's got the strength. He's got the lateral quickness for a guy that's five years -- probably five years older than Steph. He's like five years older than Steph.

I mean, Steph just made it really, really tough on him. He chased him off the line. We did a great job in transition. One of his two buckets was a flash in transition, he got there so fast. Then whenever he did get the edge, we had rim protection there. You had Donovan there, you had Samson there.

But Steph, there's a reason why, in the basketball world, people are as high on Steph as they are. He's a winning player, and obviously he's got an incredible career in the NBA ahead of him.

He's been the anti-five star freshman. He does whatever the team needs for us to win.

Q. To be clear, the Sean Harrington thing, is that something you saw on TV, radio, Twitter?

DAN HURLEY: It was a tweet that was sent to me. I got a tweet. I'm not on there a lot. I turn the notifications off, which is a game-changer for me. I like the slights. I think there's obviously a lot of experts out there, maybe people that follow different conferences haven't seen Big East basketball, but we're both on Fox, Big Ten and Big East, probably could have caught some more of those games.

But we like those external things. Again, we were picked closer to fourth than we were third in the Big East preseason polls by the coaches. So any external that you give us, we heard the things that players were saying in the lead-up to this one.

As defending national champs and what we've done since last February and how we've played in this tournament, we feel like we've earned a certain level of respect from media and opposing players when they face us right now because we've been that good.

Q. For any of the guys, did Coach bring that up, some of the slights that you guys haven't faced a team that physical like that?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, we play physicality every single day. The way we practice, the league we play in. But I think it was either the under 12 media or the under 8 media, Coach said -- I think we were up 30 and Coach said, Remember what these guys were saying yesterday? We've got to go put them away.

We just motivate each other, playing for one another. This is a group of guys that love to play together and being on the floor together.

Q. Dan, going back to the 30-0 run, did you realize it was that high in the moment?

DAN HURLEY: No, you don't. I knew that Brad was burning through timeouts and he did everything he could to stop the momentum, but it was -- we didn't shoot good. I mean, we went 3-for-17 from three. We've obviously got to get that together.

But the stops, the transition efficiency. Anytime we were inefficient in transition, these guys playing against the smaller line up, Tristen, all the guards knew that the ball needed to go to Donovan tonight. That's the beauty of the team.

It was a special level of basketball that we were playing.

Q. Dan, late in the second half, like the 3:33 mark or whatever, after the time-out, you walked out to



**midcourt and yelled something towards the crowd.
Can you take us through the moment, how you were
feeling and what you said?**

DAN HURLEY: Yeah. I finally felt safe. You see enough games, man, and it's like I'm always concerned that something bad could happen. But we've defied the odds this year, just with past champions and losing everything that we lost from last year's team, and having this giant target that we've carried the entire year, the UConn target, plus the defending national champs target.

Plus we're a program our players have a lot of confidence and a lot of swagger. Our fan base, again, is obnoxious as s--- on social. So everyone hates us.

It was a chance to celebrate with them because our fan base and our organization right now, it's an us against the world of college basketball and I wanted to celebrate with them a little bit.

Q. Steph and Cam, can you speak to what that last media time-out was like in the huddle and what this feels like, this moment, to do in your first tournament, to be in the spot that you are.

STEPHON CASTLE: For me, it didn't feel real to know we were four minutes away or less than four minutes away of going to the Final Four. It's something you dream of.

But we were just all super excited, all super connected, super together. It was one of the first times of the game that the bench was just super riled up during the time-out and it just felt like a real team, family atmosphere.

CAM SPENCER: Steph said it all. It feels a little surreal. Like Coach said, you never know when the lead's safe. But at that moment, we all kind of took it in and realized that we're going to go to the Final Four. Hopefully, accomplish one of our goals we set at the beginning of the year.

As a kid, you grow up watching March Madness and watching the Final Fours. To have an opportunity to go play there and win a couple games is very special. It means the world to all of us.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys.

DAN HURLEY: See you in Phoenix.

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