

# National Invitation Tournament: Auburn vs Illinois State

Wednesday, April 1, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

**Illinois State Redbirds**

**Ryan Pedon**

**Chase Walker**

**Johnny Kinziger**

Semifinal Pregame Press Conference



pretty cool to see, like, everything that's going on. The banner on Lucas Oil Stadium was pretty cool to see. Then playing at Hinkle is really, really cool with all the history and stuff.

It's an exciting time, and I think me, Johnny, and the rest of the guys are super excited to be here.

**Q. I know Coach worked here, and he's been in every building as a coach I think, Gainbridge and Lucas Oil. What I would want to know from you guys is have either of you ever played in any of these venues that are being used this week?**

JOHNNY KINZIGER: I have never played an actual game. I have been in Hinkle. I've gotten shots up in there, but that's about it.

CHASE WALKER: No, I have never used either one of these arenas to play basketball.

**Q. Does Coach have any special plans of taking you out to some of the great places to eat here in downtown Indy as a team?**

CHASE WALKER: I have never used any one of these arenas to play basketball.

THE MODERATOR: Does Coach have any special plans of taking you out to some of the great places to eat here in downtown Indy as a team?

CHASE WALKER: I hope so.

JOHNNY KINZIGER: Yeah, I hope so. That's a great question. Last night we were able to go to a nice Italian place. Can't remember the name of that, but we have a lot of trust in Coach, so he delivered last night.

CHASE WALKER: What was the place we walked past last night? St. Elmo's? If we win, I'm expecting a date there.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us is Coach Ryan Pedon and student-athletes Johnny Kinziger and Chase Walker. We'll get started with an opening statement from Coach.

RYAN PEDON: Yeah, really excited to be here and represent Illinois State University. It holds a little extra meaning for me personally having worked here for two years. So bringing my team back into Hinkle Fieldhouse is extra special for me.

We are looking forward to the challenge. We're going to have a great challenge here ahead of us, but we're excited to be here.

THE MODERATOR: We will open it up for questions for the players.

What I would like to know from the players is what's it like getting the opportunity to be here this week with all of the championships going on? This is something that's never been done. You are part of the celebration of basketball here. Johnny, if you could talk and then Chase, talk second, about what your feelings are about being here this week?

JOHNNY KINZIGER: Yeah, this is just a great opportunity for us players and also for our school. Personally I've never been it a Final Four in my life, so just to kind of be around everything and see how everything takes place, it's really special.

Then even to just be a part of that, it's even more special. With this group of guys, it's an awesome experience.

CHASE WALKER: Like Johnny said, great opportunity for our school. I also have never been to a Final Four, so it's



... when all is said, we're done.®

THE MODERATOR: Will you try the shrimp cocktail?

CHASE WALKER: Yes.

**Q. There is a lot of talk out there about scheduling and non-league scheduling and the ability for a school like Illinois State to play Power Conference teams like an Auburn. Obviously in a tournament setting nobody gets to decide who they're playing. It's all based on you win and you earn that right. What are you looking forward to most about having the opportunity to play this Auburn team, who just a year ago some of these players they still have, were in the final four themselves?**

JOHNNY KINZIGER: Like you said, I think this is just a really good opportunity. We were kind of on the border of if we were going to make the NIT. Once we got that call that we were going to make it, we were all excited. We knew we had a chance to prove ourselves from being from the MVC.

Started with Wake Forest. Then we go to Dayton. Now we get a chance to play Auburn. So it's just a really good chance for us to put our name out there, put our school's name out there, by playing those bigger conference teams.

JOHNNY KINZIGER: Like Johnny said, put our name out there, but I think it's also just, like, being able to compete with people that's at the highest level. If you are a basketball guy and you like this game, that's kind of what you want to do. So I think that's, at least for me, the overall big thing is just being able to compete on this level.

RYAN PEDON: We have a group that has a real chip on their shoulder. Being able to play against high-caliber opponents. Whether that be high-major, mid-major, we've played all shapes and sizes this year, it's something that we relish, we welcome, we covet.

Yeah, it's harder in this era. I think it's been well publicized here in recent weeks about mid-majors having a difficult time. You know, our scheduling the last couple of years has gone into July and August. I would rather be focused on other things other than scheduling over the summer.

It's part of the landscape right now. It's harder to schedule. There's no crying in basketball, so I'm not here to cry about it, but what I will tell you is I think it's a reflection of the system and a flawed system and a system that rewards bigger schools from Power Conferences, rewards them for playing Quad 1s and Quad 4s only.

If you are trying to beat the system and the metrics, like most of them are -- I've been on the other side, I know

those conversations, I know how that goes -- you don't want to play a Missouri Valley Conference team that's picked to win their league.

So it goes with the territory for us right now. We'll continue to try to push forward and schedule nonconference as challenging as we can, but unfortunately, right now I think it's a reflection of the metrics and the system, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: We'll dismiss the players. We'll take questions for Coach.

I think I'm correct in this. Were you on the Ohio State staff when we played Gonzaga and you played Notre Dame to start that first game I think 9-10 -- first two games in Lucas Oil Stadium?

RYAN PEDON: I was not on that staff, but when I do come back to Indianapolis, it takes me back to COVID year. You know, we spent about a two-week stretch here at the JW Marriott that I would like to forget personally.

We lost in the Big Ten Championship in Lucas Oil. They sent us back to our room, same hotel rooms at JW Marriott, and we were upset by Oral Roberts. So that's a memory that I would love to forget, but every time I pass that JW Marriott, I remember that. I would like to have some obviously better memories here coming back to Indianapolis once again.

**Q. You guys touched on it a little, how were you able to refocus once you learned that you were going to be participating in the NIT and that you were able to pull off a few wins here to get to this point?**

RYAN PEDON: Yeah, our season ended abruptly in the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament, disappointingly. It wasn't our best night. Our guys were very disappointed.

I think, looking back on it -- and we've gone on tournament runs here in each of the last two years -- I do think the separation of time has helped us. It's one of the things that I would say has helped us. It allowed us to get away.

We sent our players home. It was spring break. I brought them back after about six days off, and we were practicing Friday, Saturday, Sunday leading into Selection Sunday in hopes that we would make the NIT. So we were doing that not even sure if we were going to make it for sure.

I think, you know, the separation helped. I think, secondly, there's a level of resolve that's required, right, because you're sort of recalibrating in that moment.

It's an honor to play in the postseason for sure, but you



know, the locker room -- we see it all across the country in non-NCAA tournaments. If you're not in the right frame of mind, you'll set yourself up to go home real quick.

I think their resolve collectively has really helped us. Like anything, I think momentum is very fragile. It can be generated pretty quickly, especially this time of year. Our opening game against Kent State at home a 20-plus point win. I think got us back in the right frame of mind. Our guys were hungry.

We've sort of built there, but it's been a really remarkable two weeks for our program. It's been a lot of fun. The places that this tournament has taken us, the challenges that we've had, I'm very thankful for that. I know our players are, too.

**Q. You coached here at Butler for two years, so how does it feel to be back in Hinkle Fieldhouse? What memories do you have from your time here?**

RYAN PEDON: Great memories from our time here. I talk about this a lot. That's a great question, and I'm sure that came from AI as well, ChatGPT.

But I have wonderful memories from being here at Butler, and I've shared this along our journey many times, but the mold of our program has been built in what I learned and what I experienced here at Butler very much so.

The values that our program is built on, the foundation, who we recruit, why we recruit them, the characteristics that they have, and then, of course, what we preach, teach, coach, and emphasize on a daily basis. I've worked at seven different schools. My most meaningful stop, without question, was here.

It had the greatest affect on me as a professional, and it aligned. It just hit the mark with me. I think as human beings we all have moments throughout our journeys that we come aligned with the right people at the right time or the right company or organization or in my case university. What my two years here helped me with along my journey I can't put into words.

Very much our program is built in the mold of some of the great memories I have here and what I've learned here.

**Q. As a mid-major team whose season ended sort of abruptly in the valley tournament, you've been able to turn it argument around and beat some great teams like Wake Forest in it is tournament. How do you see that impacting your program going forward?**

RYAN PEDON: Yeah, I think it's created some immediate

momentum in the short-term, no question. For our program, also for our fan base. I think at our level we don't get an opportunity to play these types of teams all the time.

Carpe diem, right? Seize the moment, seize the day. That's been a message that we've rallied behind here in the last month of the season, and I think it rings true, especially with some of these opportunities we've had.

So I think it can generate momentum in the moment, but what it does for us, we experienced this last year. The CBI, winning the CBI championship, that was a far greater thing for our program than I think I would have imagined, to be real honest with you.

It helped with our community. It helped with our fan base. It gave a lot of confidence, a real shot in the arm to our program that as we were building, you know, we're building up, it gave us a marker, a sense of achievement to end the season.

That can do a lot for you in the offseason. It can also put a real target on your chest. I think there's some unintended consequences that I think, you know, I would love to lie beneath the weeds, of course, but when you win a tournament and you play well like that on an elevated stage to end the season, that's going to bring attention to your program, but that's part of it. Part of our program building, we better be able to handle that.

I'm really proud of our time. I'm proud of the way they've responded. You know, we went a month -- our league is a bear. We went a month, almost a month, winning and then losing one and then winning one and then losing one and then winning one and then losing one.

It's a lot harder to go through that than I think meets the eye, right? You would love to have just a few of those swings throughout a whole season, but we had them back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back. I think it hardened us. It galvanized us. I think we're seeing the fruits of that labor going through that tough stuff here in March and now April.

What a privilege to be playing in April. I mean, this is awesome. For a basketball junkie, this is an awesome time of year anyways, but to be able to bring our team here to the same city where they're hosting a Final Four -- I've been to Final Fours for almost 30 years now. These guys haven't ever been to a Final Four, so they have no clue of the pageantry, the energy, the people that are going to be here. It's going to be so fun for them.

I'm really excited for them, and I'm really excited for our fan base as well.

