

# Final Four Profile: Illinois Fighting Illini

*They are cooking at the right time— Brad Underwood's Illinois team has an explosive offense and behemoths down low. Even through this loaded field, they have the recipe to cut down the nets*

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Michigan and Arizona are juggernauts. UConn is a household name. Where does Illinois stand in this Final Four?

Well, let's take a look. They have the most efficient offense in America. They have won each game in the tournament by double digits. They are the tallest team in the country. They finished second in a loaded Big Ten. They have one of the best freshmen in the country running the point. They are also technically favored in the betting lines against UConn.

Illinois is not just "happy to be there." This team can win a national championship, and they have been trending in the right direction at just the right time.

Illinois has always had offensive production with Brad Underwood at the helm. The last three seasons, Illinois has had a top 20 offense in America. This year's team is no different, but it took a little while for Keaton Wagler (17.9 ppg, 5 rpg, 4.3 apg, 40.7% 3PT) to get rolling. Take the first matchup between UConn and Illinois as proof; Wagler played just 14 minutes and took three shots. If UConn anticipates and prepares for that level of production from Wagler, they may lose by 40.

Wagler is an all-level scorer with a surefire lottery prospect in the upcoming nBA draft, but the real treasures around Wagler make Illinois such a threat. Andrej Stojakovic (13.6 ppg, 4.4 rpg) does not shoot the three like his father, but he essentially does everything else for the Illini as their second leading scorer while coming off the bench. Kylan Boswell (12.5 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 0.8 steals per game) is the defensive presence in the backcourt. Freshman David Mirkovic (13.5 ppg, 8.1 rpg) has blossomed and grown throughout the months of this season, and the Ivisic brothers duo measure at seven feet and command the paint.

Illinois has used the development of this offense to their advantage as the season has worn on. Since Illinois' loss to UConn in November, the Illini went 18-6 through a

talented Big Ten conference. Their offensive production hit a high with Keaton Wagler's 46 point performance at Mackey arena in a six point over Purdue. The Illini can shoot from the perimeter, and with the amount of height they have down low, scoring in the paint and rebounding also gives them plenty of second chance buckets.

Illinois is not necessarily the "dark horse" of this Final Four (it is hard for a team this talented to be deemed as such), and there is a true sense that this team has what it takes to win it all. Brad Underwood lost two years ago to UConn in the Final Four, but this team is likely more talented than the 2024 team that had Terrence Shannon Jr. This year's team is deep, tall, versatile and athletic.

Brad Underwood has built not just a team, but a community. For starters, he dipped into Europe for his recruiting and came out with David Mirkovic (Montenegro), the Ivisic brothers (Croatia), and Mihailo Petrovic (Serbia). This kinship amongst the Europeans, as well as their developing relationship with the Americans in the locker room, have obviously paid their dividends on the court. There is a camaraderie about this team seen in interviews, press conferences, and locker room interactions. The team feels like they are truly having fun playing together, and when they are playing this well, how can you not have a little fun?

There is also the backstory of Keaton Wagler, who was not highly recruited or sought after in any way. Nobody really pegged Wagler as a potential lottery pick, and yet he is now leading a Final Four team, two wins from a national title. Wagler himself was hiding in plain sight, just as this Illinois team may have been the entire season. Eight losses, seeded third, did not win their league or their league tournament. Through all of that, they made it to the Final Four. It is likely the players themselves are not shocked—they know what they have in that locker room.

Illinois walks into their matchup against Connecticut as a 1.5 point favorite. With the way these rosters have developed and been constructed over the course of the season, their first matchup in November might be as close to useless as a roll of game film could be. Illinois in particular has changed so much for the better since then, and they are truly flying into the Final Four on their highest of highs.

They have played astoundingly consistently all throughout the first three rounds of this tournament. All Illinois has to do to win the national championship is play their game. Keaton Wagler is the focal point, but this team has weapons from all angles. The Final Four is always impossible to predict, but this Illinois team has an air about them. Strong, consistent, and reliable: that sounds like a title contender to me.