Daily Sports

MEN'S BASKETBALL: TWELVE THREE-POINTERS LIFT UCONN PAST ILLINOIS TO ITS THIRD NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP APPEARANCE IN FOUR YEARS



UConn men's basketball playing against Illinois in the Final Four during the 2026 March Madness tournament. The Huskies won the game, advancing to the championship match on Monday. PHOTOS BY EMMA MEIDINGER, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR

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They say that basketball means a little more in Indiana. So, UConn brought a little bit of Indiana with them to the Final Four. Braylon Mullins returned to his home state with a trip to the National Championship on the line.

The freshman knocked down four threes in the Huskies' (34-5) 71-62 win over Illinois in the National Semifinal, on Saturday.

Mullins became just the second freshman to ever hit four three-pointers in a Final Four game, joining Mike Bibby, who accomplished the feat in 1997. The win advanced UConn to its third appearance in the tournament final under head coach Dan Hurley.

"There's no better feeling than being one of the last two teams standing," Hurley said.

Just six days after his historic buzzer-beater in the Elite Eight, Mullins wasted no time in picking up right where he left off. He buried back-to-back threes to score the Huskies' first six points of the game.

"I knew I needed to shoot it with confidence coming off last Sunday just to have that flow, that momentum," Mullins said. "Seeing the first two go in, it just boosts all the confidence for you to keep shooting."

Mullins' hot start jolted UConn's best shooting night of the tournament so far. The Huskies finished the night with 12 three-pointers, their most since the team's win over Xavier in the Big East Tournament Quarterfinal.

Jayden Ross netted UConn's next triple before Tarris Reed Jr. punched home a dunk, forcing Illinois (28-9) head coach Brad Underwood to call his first timeout with his team down 18-9. Seven first-half threes put the Huskies up eight going into the half.

"When you start seeing the ball go through the hoop, it builds a level of confidence on the offensive end that really can't be shaken," Ross said.

Solo Ball scored eight of his 13 points in the opening 10 minutes of the second half. The junior knocked down two threes to finish the night with three, his best shooting night of the tournament. Ball entered the game shooting less than 24% from deep in the tournament.

Jaylin Stewart connected on another three for the Huskies, which extended their lead to 14 with 9:44 to go.

As the Huskies' three-point parade continued, Tarris Reed Jr. was vicious in the paint. The junior finished with 17 points, leading the team in scoring for the fourth time in five tournament games.

Illinois entered the game as one of the top rebounding teams in the country, with the highest offensive rebound rate. Reed recorded his third double-double of the tournament, pulling down 11 rebounds and helping hold the Illini to just a two-rebound advantage on the offensive glass and eight overall.

"This version of him is one of the best players in this tournament," Hurley said.

But the Illini would not see their championship hopes shattered without punching back.

Keaton Wagler led the Illini with 10-second half points as he tried to will them back into the game. Tomislav Ivisic sunk a short jumper before knocking down four consecutive free throws, leading a 10-0 run for Illinois. The Huskies were 1-of-7 from the field during the surge.

A layup from Wagler made it a four-point game with less than three minutes to go and all the momentum behind the Illini.

Alex Karaban stepped into a three amidst a cold shooting night where he finished 1-of-7 from deep. He missed his mark once again, and it seemed that Illinois was going to have a chance to bring the game within two.

That's when Silas Demary Jr. leapt up and pulled down the offensive rebound through tangled Illini arms. He swung it out to the hometown kid Mullins, who knocked down the second-chance three to put the Huskies up seven with less than a minute to go.

Demary described the play as being "nothing but sheer effort."

"Even with the ankle, I'm just trying to give everything I have for my teammates and not leave anything out there, especially in a moment like this," Demary said.

Mullins' shot put the game just out of reach as the Huskies went on to make five free throws to close it out.

Illinois was the No. 1 offense in the country coming into the tournament's penultimate game. The Huskies defense held the Illini to their worst shooting performance of the season at 34% from the field. It was also Illinois lowest scoring total since its loss to UConn during the regular season in November.

The Huskies will appear in their seventh National Championship since 1999 on Monday where they will meet Michigan. UConn is a perfect 6-0 in national title games. Hurley has a chance to become the first coach in over 50 years to win three championships in four years.

The game tips off at 8:30 p.m. and will be available on TBS.