

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Saint Peter's vs Tennessee

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Spectrum Center

## Tennessee Volunteers

## Rick Barnes

## Zakai Zeigler

## Dalton Knecht

### Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to start with the student-athletes from Tennessee.

**Q. Zakai, we spoke with your brother Armoni just a little bit ago, and we talked about the matchup going into tomorrow and kind of the realization that it's actually happening. He also said you were up 6-5 in a series of one-on-one competitions with him. Overall, looking at this as a whole, how cool of a moment is that that you're going to be able to experience tomorrow night?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: It's really cool. Not too many times that two brothers face off in a big-time tournament like this. To clear the air, he's never beat me one-on-one. He's not even close in the series at all. And he's not even close in his scores.

But it's really cool, like our parents, they're just so happy for us. I can't wait to get out there and just go out there and get the win.

**Q. Zakai, how do you feel the competition will be between you and your brother tomorrow at the game?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Me and him, we're two competitive people. We've gotten in plenty of fights just over us being competitive.

At the end of the day, it's still a team sport. Me and my team, we're really competitive as a team. I'm not sure how they are on their team, but on our end, we're really competitive. We're going to do whatever it takes to go out there and get the win.



**Q. Zakai, can you describe your brother's game? Strengths, weaknesses, et cetera.**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I would say just everything he does, I do a little bit better, except for athleticism and height. That's the only two things that he has better than me, athleticism and height. Everything else, I do better times probably about five.

**Q. Dalton, coming off what happened in Nashville last week, for you guys to be able to regroup, what was the message you and Zakai and others kind of talked about over the last four or five days in preparing for tomorrow night?**

DALTON KNECHT: The big thing is it's win or go home now. So we all know we've got to be the most physical team out there and be the aggressors because we weren't in Nashville.

**Q. Dalton, you all have been down at times this season and sometimes big, but you've come back every time, maybe not to win the game. What didn't happen in Nashville? What was different? Why did you not get out of that hole?**

DALTON KNECHT: We just didn't match their physicality. They were the more physical team, and they were the aggressors from the jump. We just weren't there. We need to be -- we're going to be more competitive, especially because we know it's win or go home and this could be our last game. We definitely don't want that to happen. So we're going to come out ready to fight and be the aggressors.

**Q. A year ago at this time you were navigating the portal, a million calls and whatnot. Curious what maybe your advice would be to anyone navigating that process this year and what has made this one year with Tennessee so special for you?**

DALTON KNECHT: Just take your time. Don't listen to what they say. Just actually go to the place that really wants you, not just because of the gear and all this type of



stuff and what looks nice. Go to the spot that actually wants you.

In Tennessee, it's just a special place. I love Vol nation and stuff. This one year has been probably the best year of my life because it's so special to me.

**Q. I'm going to go back to the conversation I had with your brother earlier. He said, when you guys step on the court tomorrow night, you are not brothers. That matchup, you guys playing pickup and then from something like that, you share the same mentality and a lot of trash talk tomorrow night. He also said, by the way, that he will be guarding you at times tomorrow as well.**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Guarding me or guarding Dalton?

**Q. Guarding you.**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: If he guards either one of us, it's ballgame. On a serious note, like I said before, I'm really competitive. No matter if it's pickup, one-on-one, just a regular workout, I want to win at everything. So it's going to be the same competitiveness and the same mindset.

Once we step between the lines, whether it's my friend, my brother, whoever it is, whether it's my dad, it doesn't matter, I'm trying to go out there and win.

**Q. Dalton, there's been a lot of firsts this year, but there hasn't been in your career an NCAA Tournament game. What do you think those emotions are going to be like tomorrow? What has this whole experience been like for you so far?**

DALTON KNECHT: It's been real cool. I'm trying to take it all in because it's my first March Madness. My teammates will be there, make sure that the team's locked in, all of us that haven't made it or are going to be the first ones. It's going to be make sure we're in check. So we're going to be fine.

**Q. Zakai, obviously you weren't able to play this time last season and the team went on a pretty solid run anyway. But with you back now, how do you kind of personally fight the urge to try to make up for everything and put too much on yourself going into this tournament?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I wouldn't even say I'm trying to put a lot on myself. Just like when I'm playing and Coach Barnes tells me you can't get it all back in one play. I think it of it the same situation. I can't get any of the time I lost back.

Whatever I do, I go out there, and I just go out there and play. I can't think of it as I can't do this or do that just to make up for a lost year. I can't think of it like that. I have to go out there and do whatever it takes to win for me and my team.

**Q. I know you haven't been here this whole time, but the last five tournaments Tennessee's been in, they've been defeated by a lower seed. How anxious are you guys to kind of break through, get past that Sweet 16, and make a deeper run?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: We understand that every team in this tournament is built from the 1 seed to the 16 seed every team in every region, everyone here deserves that spot. They went out there and earned that spot, so I understand that. They're good and everybody can play.

We don't take any team for granted. We don't overlook any team. We're just going to go out there and do what we need to do to win. We won't look at any names or any number beside their name.

DALTON KNECHT: Just staying locked in. It don't matter, like Z said, if they're a 16 seed or 15, it don't matter. They made their run to get into March. We've just got to play like it's a great team because they are a great team to get into this tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. We'll see you tomorrow.

We'll take questions for Coach Barnes.

**Q. Coach, just do you have any concerns about the performance of Mississippi State lingering, or do you feel like you got one out of the way and you can kind of flush it?**

RICK BARNES: Well, we have to put it out of the way. We know we didn't play the way we wanted to play, didn't get the result we wanted. But you always have to put it behind you, get ready for the next one in front of you.

I can tell you as a coaching staff we've let our guys know right here how good of an opponent we're playing at St. Peter's. We've been into film with them enough and talked about it, and it's up to us as coaches to do our job. It's certainly up to the players to get themselves mentally ready and focused and know we're getting ready to play a team that's as capable as anybody in this tournament.

**Q. This is the sixth straight year that Tennessee has made the tournament. What has been the formula for your team's success this year in making it back?**

RICK BARNES: Again, it always starts with the players. We've got a great administration at the University of Tennessee that provided us and our players are everything that we need. It still goes back to the work, the commitment that the players have to put into it, and we're excited because you ask any player, I think they would tell you that they want to be a part of this event this time of year.

We're blessed to have had a lot of guys who have done what they need to do to get us back here.

**Q. How much does having Dalton help you guys? I know you've had some struggles in the tournament over the past few years, but how much does a scorer like that take pressure off you guys and maybe get you past that to the Sweet 16?**

RICK BARNES: I think it's important, when you've got a guy that as good a player as he is, he would tell you too that he needs the other guys to do their part because of the attention he's starting to get from everybody. Obviously he would be a number one target for a team getting ready to play us.

With that said he's in a role that's never really been in it. With all that's come his way this year, he certainly deserves it. But I think he would tell you too that his teammates have helped him along the way. We need him to do what he does, but we need his teammates to do what they need to do to help him.

**Q. Just there's been a lot of talk about expanding the tournament formats, things like that moving forward. I'm curious kind of what you feel like the future of the NCAA Tournament looks like or where you think it might fall and what you'd like to see out of it.**

RICK BARNES: I don't know where the future of the intercollegiate athletics is going with leagues getting bigger, things like that. But where we are today, I don't think you can ask a team to win more than six games to win a National Championship. It's really demanding, if you ask me.

Or if there's teams that are right there that are worthy to be in, maybe you could add four more for play-in games, things like that. But teams have had great years or teams -- again, winning six games in this tournament is hard, it's really, really hard.

Also, I think we do have a three-week window here where we captivate the country, and we're in, I think, the most exciting sporting event because every state in the country

can be represented some way, somehow.

I'm not for expanding the tournament to make it a national champion having to win more than six games to get there.

**Q. Can you ever really know what to expect when you get into this tournament? You look at your team this year, and you would probably say the season would set up to be about as confident as you could be in this group. Is it just different right now?**

RICK BARNES: The answer is I don't. I wish I did. I wish I knew everything that went into every player's mindset, what he's thinking right now with everything. I can tell you I've been blessed to be in this tournament a lot, and if it were up to me, we'd win every game. We'd have never lost.

A lot goes into it. It's different. It's hard, really, as a coach. You like to feel like you can get a read. Sometimes you think you've got a read and it's wrong. Sometimes you don't think you have the read and it turns out better than you thought. So I wish I knew that. If I did, I would fix it all.

But I'm hoping that our guys again understand it's truly an honor, and it's a blessing that they got themselves here. When it's all said and done, you want to look back and know that your work and everything you did, you left it out there, and there's no regrets.

**Q. No matter how much success you have, to a lot of people around here, you'll be the guy from Hickory and Lenoir-Rhyne. Can you allow yourself to, at this point in your career, appreciate this, being here in Charlotte, and savor this experience?**

RICK BARNES: You know, I've been gone so long, but I am from North Carolina. I'm from Hickory. So much of me, I like to think I'm the same back then.

I was telling stories back there, I was in the tenth grade, I came to the old Charlotte Coliseum, and I think the night I was there, I watched Pistol Pete Maravich score 49 points against Clemson. They had the leading scorer in the ACC, a guy named Butch Zatezalo.

My first game as a college coach was in the old Charlotte Coliseum when I was at Davidson. I remember telling recruits, 11,666. And I also told the story that was the first time I was personally able to meet Coach Smith. I watched his team beat John Kuester's Boston University team right there. So I do have a lot of great memories.

I tell everybody, when you grow up in Hickory and you really wanted to impress a girl, you drove her to Charlotte



and took her to the Open Kitchen, and I think it's still there. If you did that, the girls knew you were serious.

I remember when the Charlotte Town Mall opened up and all of that. So Charlotte to me was a big, big city. My first year in high school, we integrated the schools, and we went from a 3A school to a 4A school, and we played all of our games in Charlotte. That was a long ride back then because we 40 went all the way. Cleared 77.

I do have a lot of great memories in this state. I tell everybody without question North Carolina has got the best barbecue, and I will always stand by that, I can tell you.

**Q. Rick, I wanted to ask you about Jordan's recruitment. I know people probably assume his dad's here and it was easy. I know it was more complicated than that. I understand the relationship with you was a big part of that. Can you go back to that recruitment and what it was like for you?**

RICK BARNES: I told his dad, first of all, I want your son to be a part of it. It all started when I was at upstate, that he would come back to Knoxville and work out at our facility for two years, Lamonte Turner and Jordan Bowden. He would work out with those two guys that had left the program. Every time they said, Coach, if this guy ever transfers, you want him. He's one of us. He would be great here.

With that said, I told Jordan, and I thought the family really handled the situation at upstate well because they were really appreciative of Dave Dickerson, giving him a chance and a scholarship. He stayed two years, and then after that he felt like it was time for him to go.

I told Coach Gainey, I said, look -- he said, Coach, I don't want to recruit him. He said, you know I would love him to be here, but I want him to be here because he wants to be here. I said, We're going to recruit him. We don't get him, you might be looking for a job. I'm kidding with him. I used to kid with him.

But I knew one thing off the bat, his mother wanted him to be there. That I knew. And the more you're around the family, you knew how close knit they were. But I did want Jordan to feel that we weren't taking anything for granted, that we wanted to recruit him and we wanted him to be a part of our program.

So we recruited him more so than his dad as a staff. Personally I did. But talking to his mom too, again, she said the same thing. We want him -- this is where he wants to be, we want him to make that decision. When he did, we were obviously excited about it.

**Q. Rick, over the last few years, we've seen kind of the changing of the guard, a lot of the old coaches stepping away, Roy, K, Boeheim, even Saban on the football side. Some of them said, some of the fun has gone out of it because of the NIL and the constant turnover of the transfer portal. How much of an impact has that had on coaching, and is it still fun?**

RICK BARNES: It's always fun when you've got a group of guys that you love being with every day. The one thing that I thought, I read an article where Coach Saban had made the comment after his team also, the way they acted, I thought about that immediately after our game in the SEC Tournament against Mississippi State.

I walked in the locker room, the first person I saw that beat me off the court was Zakai Zeigler, and he was crying. I think, as long as you've got players that you know that really care and they want to really work at being the very best they can be, I think if players are just playing for the sheer money of it, I think it would drive all coaches crazy.

But we've got decisions as coaches to make. We've got to do our intel there. We've got to let guys know that, hey, we don't want them to come because of the money. We want them to come to be a part of a program we're trying to build.

We also have -- we think that we have a great freshman class that we're excited about, and we think now, when we're done in this tournament, it's going to be their turn to step in there.

But the best part about coaching, I think all those guys, which to me it's sad because I've got so much respect for Jim Boeheim, Roy, and Coach K and other coaches, that it is a different game. It is.

Now the only positive thing I can say about it is they would all tell you that we used to have to recruit guys for two, three years and maybe not get them. Now because of the transfer portal and the NIL, it could be a ten-day process and you move on. That's the only -- I guess if there is a positive for what's going on right now, it's that. You don't have to put as much time in recruiting, and you find out real quick whether you're in or out and move on to the next one, whatever it may be.

I think that all of us would tell you that we're probably not happy to where it is today, the way it is, because we don't really know what's going to happen five, ten years from now with where we are right now, and I think that us that are older are probably concerned that in some ways -- again, I don't think any of us have ever had a problem with



guys making money, but in the long run, how is it going to affect when you get older and all of this is shut down.

**Q. Is there something to be said for being in this tournament and playing a team that has already been through those situations where, if they lose, their season's done? Obviously it hasn't been a thing for you all yet. Is that something that plays into this at all?**

RICK BARNES: Like what do you mean?

**Q. Like in terms of St. Peter's, if they had lost in their conference tournament, they wouldn't be here.**

RICK BARNES: Again, but they didn't, and they are here. When you look at the teams that are here, they've earned it. I don't care if you're playing in this tournament, I have a great deal of respect for the basketball committee, and I learned it a long time ago from Dave Gavitt, and obviously Danny was on my staff. I know how hard that committee's working to try to be fair, to get everybody in it.

All they do, I don't know how it all comes about other than the fact I know how hard they work at trying to get it right. So if you're in it, you've earned it. And if you're in it, you've got to believe that you've got a chance to advance and move on.

**Q. Back to the North Carolina connections, Justin Gainey, your assistant coach, also is a big deal to this state in basketball. Have you two had a chance to reminisce on you coaching against him? How do you guys think he'll feel when you step out on the court tomorrow, just anything like that?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I just always tell Justin, I said, I appreciate you. I think you helped me win eight games. You know, kidding with him all the time, because I watched him and had great respect because he was so highly competitive. His high school coach, Freddie Johnson, was my first year at Davidson College, Eddie Biedenbach said, you've got to grow our camp.

I found out that Freddie was taking a bunch of kids to the Duke camp, and I called him and said, we'll pay you \$150. I'll give you \$10 for every kid you bring. I think he brought 125. Eddie thought that was great. He didn't know he got 10 extra dollars to bring each kid.

But watching him in my time at Clemson, competing against him, then watching him on the road. He's more than ready to be a head coach at any level. He's highly committed, as anybody I've ever been around. He's got a great feel, a great relationship with players. Him coming

back here, I'm sure he's, like anybody be, being hit up for a lot of tickets.

I'll tell you, when we hired him, I knew right from the beginning we hit a home run. I think I've got the best staff in the country. All of them, I think, are ready to be head coaches if they wanted to. Certainly Justin has had his opportunities. He's a guy that I know that, when he makes that move, I know he'll make the right decision.

**Q. Coach Mason from St. Peter's made note about how they've never faced a guy like Dalton. What's your plan in utilizing him in tomorrow's game and making sure he doesn't get shut down?**

RICK BARNES: I would never shut him down if it was up to me. We have different things we do to try to get him going and making it hard for teams just to sit in one area waiting on him to think. We try to move him around as much as we can.

He'll have to do a lot of that on his own. He knows he's going to have to find different ways to score because they could -- we think that they could show us a lot of zone tomorrow and there could be some different things.

At this time of year, you've got to be prepared for everything. Again, they're a really good, hard-nosed, tough -- I've got great respect for northeast basketball because of my time at Providence. They're a tough-minded team that they know how they play, they know what they do. There's no doubt they've got guys that I know are going to look at a challenge and say, hey, let me take that challenge.

So Dalton's going to have to work, but his teammates are going to have to do their job too to help them do what needs to get done.

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