

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Spectrum Center

Tennessee Volunteers

Rick Barnes

Zakai Zeigler

Jonas Aidoo

Media Conference

Tennessee - 83, St. Peter's - 49

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to start with Tennessee.

RICK BARNES: Really proud of our guys' focus getting ready and understanding what we needed to do to win the game tonight, but also have to really congratulate St. Peter's for being here, because I've said forever you don't take this tournament for granted. For them to do what they did to finish the season strong and get here is a real compliment to their coaches, coaching staff, and players.

But just really proud of the way our guys prepared getting ready for this game and the way we came out in the first half and really played well defensively.

I thought we settled in on offense, but a good performance by a lot of different guys.

Q. Zakai, how good did it feel to be out there? I imagine you've been waiting two years for this night.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, I feel pretty good. The job's still not finished, though. We've still got to handle Texas, but it's a good feeling to be back out there.

Q. Zakai, do you feel like it was important to have a win like this where you kind of leave no doubt to get back on track heading into this round?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, I feel like we had to get our toughness back. Tonight I feel like we did from the jump. The entire game, we kept our foot on their necks.



St. Peter's is a really good team. They're a really tough team. So we had to match their toughness and just play like that for the entire game.

Q. Jonas, you had a couple shots fall early in the game. How important was that for you building that confidence early on?

JONAS AIDOO: For me, it was staying aggressive at all times. Coach preached that to me a lot, so I was just really staying aggressive with that.

Q. Jonas, sort of a similar question. I know you all always want to play inside out, but when you see the sort of size advantage that you had, did you just kind of really think like, okay, I really need to be aggressive early in this game?

JONAS AIDOO: Of course. Like I said before, Coach has been preaching that, and we've been working on that a lot in practice too. So just doing what we do in practice into the game.

Q. Zakai, anything stand out about Texas? I don't know if you've had a chance to look at them at all or see their previous game.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Texas, they're a good team. We've still got to come out strong. We've still got to be ourselves and be a tough team.

Q. Zakai, I saw a stat that you're the first Tennessee player with a points-assists double-double in the tournament. I believe it said 50 years from ESPN. What goes through your mind when you hear that, and what does it mean to you to be part of history for the Vols in the tournament?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: It's a really good feeling, but I've got to thank my teammates because I wouldn't be able to do it without them making shots. So I've got to really shout out to them.

Oh, yeah, and Coach Barnes.



(Laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Barnes.

Q. Two-part question. You've played Texas before, but now Rodney's their head coach, you guys have a good relationship. How difficult is it to play someone you have a good relationship with? And then the second part is what stands out about this Texas team?

RICK BARNES: Well, one, it is tough when you are playing against guys that have helped -- been a part of my career for a long time, he and Coach Haith, Chris Ogden, so many guys there that helped us while I was there and were a big part of our success there.

So, yeah, it's always tough when you do that because we all are close. We stay in touch with each other. We talk throughout the year.

But when you look at them, the fact that they've got one of the all-time great scorers that can get going, but I like their balance. I haven't watched them a lot, I really haven't, because I just won't allow myself to do that. I couldn't even tell you who's in our bracket right now other than, when we came here, we knew it was the three teams other than ourselves.

But I have great respect for Rodney and Frank Haith and Chris Ogden, guys, again, that I know are going to be very well prepared. It's never easy, but those guys probably know me as well as anybody, and they know how I think. I think, if you ask both of us, would we rather be playing someone else, the answer would be yes.

Q. You mentioned you liked your team's focus, in the days leading up, you don't know how they'll start until they're out there, but did you see all week what you wanted leading up to tonight as well?

RICK BARNES: We did because, you know what, we were concerned because our league -- I mean, I truly believe we had the most competitive league in college basketball this year. When you go down the last week, you could end up in a five-way tie for first place. We really went at each other.

I was concerned about how hard we all had to fight at the end of the year, all fighting for a conference championship. And we lost two in a row, and one game I don't think we played poorly, but we weren't our best. Then we played probably our second worst half of the season in the tournament.

We came back. I really admire and appreciate our guys.

We were very transparent. We watched the whole game and talked about where we lost our focus with our game plan and why we splintered and what caused it.

So, yeah, those guys responded. When we went back out on the court and went to work, they did respond. Just proud of them. They were really focused with what we needed to get done.

Q. How would you characterize your defensive performance tonight, particularly against Corey Washington, and how much of your size advantage do you feel like that smothered them a bit?

RICK BARNES: They're a team, if you look at them, they're really an inside two-point shooting team. We worked hard on guard post-ups. We knew they were going to try to get there and back down. We spent a lot of time not wanting to give them a lot of room to operate and try to use our length when he wanted to pass out of it, make it hard for them to whip it to the other side.

I thought we really did a good job standing in those gaps early. Even when they were -- they run really good stuff. They're really well coached. But we were focused on the details, and that was important.

I do think our size helps us. There's no doubt, in terms of deflections, trying to take away those windows where they can whip it back to the back side.

Q. You have pretty good long moment with Bash on the handshake line. Can you share maybe the message you might have given him?

RICK BARNES: I just told him I think he's got a great future, and they've done a great job. Getting to go this tournament is hard. When you get here, right now it's tough when you lose because, believe me, they came into this game expecting to win, and there's no doubt with what they had done two years ago with a team that got it going here at the end.

They hit us at time where they played well. I watched them when we were getting ready. I met him years ago when he was at St. Benedict's. We talked about that for a second. He's got a great future ahead of him.

But his team is extremely well coached. The fact he knows his team and he had to try to get them in spots to win the game. That's where, back to your first question, I think our length was a factor for us.

Q. With Tobe there, what happened when he went out with the leg? Is he all right?



RICK BARNES: He's okay. He felt he had a little something with his right hip up high or something. We could have played him more, but we decided not to just to make sure, because Tobe is one of those guys that sometimes he won't tell you the truth. He just wants to play so badly that we weren't going to take a chance with him, even though he felt he could go a little bit more.

They kept him warmed up out there in the hallway a little bit. He could have played more. We just decided not to do it.

Q. It seems like a bit of a nostalgia tour for you back in your home state, now playing Texas. How do you balance some of the more sentimental things tied to your past with the task at hand to win?

RICK BARNES: Well, I've got great respect for my time at the University of Texas, and I've got dear friends that they'll be friends until the day I die. Like I said, great relationships with much of that staff, but I've been gone nine years, and I'm a Tennessee Volunteer. The time I had there was special because a lot of -- really there's a lot of people there that touched my life, and we've had a lot of people that have led that program and done extremely well.

But I thank the good Lord for -- coming to Tennessee was a blessing. Maybe I didn't know it at the time. But I couldn't have asked for a better way to be in a position where my career will end.

When we get ready to play, I can assure you that Rodney and his staff are going to try to win that game as hard as they can, and I can tell you we're going to try to do the same thing.

Q. I know you never know how it's going to go until the game gets started, but when you're in the locker room and look around and the guy who hasn't played multiple NCAA games is a First Team All-American, how much confidence does that give you that you guys will handle the moment?

RICK BARNES: We've talked about it, and I will go back again to the start of the year, our nonleague schedule, going on the road, Michigan State, going on the road to Wisconsin, Illinois coming in, Purdue, all that.

But it's playing in our league where we were in hostile arenas all year, and our crowds were great everywhere we went. Honestly, to answer that question, you hope they respond well, but you're not sure until they get out there.

We kept trying to tell them to have fun. We've worked hard to be here. Because you do worry about that. You worry about when they step out there because this is something all kids grow up wanting to be a part of March Madness. They all do. We said, okay, you grew up thinking about it. Let's go have fun being here. You've earned it, and just be who we are.

I'm really proud of the focus these guys had coming in. I do think our older guys being here helps those guys too.

Q. Were you happier with the willingness to shoot when the shots were there from some of our shooters? How important were the couple that Santi hit in the game?

RICK BARNES: I think it is important. I tell Santi, he impacts the game in so many ways other than what's on the stat sheet. I said, the one thing about you, Santi, all I want to you do is make the right play. If the right play is to shoot it, you shoot it. He turned it over, and I told him, you shoot the ball. You made two, and the right play is to shoot it.

The same thing with Jordan Gainey and all of them, just make the right play. We've got guys that we think could shoot the ball and we want them to shoot it with confidence. That was something we echoed all week. We're going to take our shots, and we're going to be aggressive. Again, I want to see them make the right play, and if it's to shoot it, just shoot it.

Then we're in a position where we normally keep the floor spaced well, balanced well, that we can rebound the balls. When you turn down the shots where everyone's thinking you're going to shoot it, and they end up in turnovers.

Q. Rick, what did you like from Jonas Aidoo tonight, especially in those first couple minutes where he was able to see a couple of early shots fall?

RICK BARNES: He was aggressive. I thought physically he -- Jonas can shoot the ball. I thought he got to his spots. Again, I thought his teammates knew where he was. We hit him with some ball screens, quick ball screens, and he got off of it pretty quick and got his feet set.

Normally when he gets his feet under him, he shoots a high percentage. We need him to be aggressive. He affects so much with his length on the defensive end. I always tell him that you can do the same thing on offense if you'll just score before you get the ball. That's mainly talking about footwork.

Tonight I thought he was moving well and doing that.

Q. In that decade that Rodney was on your staff, what did he do best? What do you think he does best as a head coach?

RICK BARNES: Rodney was a high school coach, and he grew up -- you talk about a guy that's living his dream, his dream job was always to be the head coach at the University of Texas.

I had a chance -- I got a call from Frank Haith one day. Frank was my associate head coach. He said we need to hire someone. I can't remember who left. Someone on our staff had left for a head job. Rodney had been offered a chance to work for Kelvin Sampson the year before. Frank asked me, he said, what would happen if Rodney took the job with Kelvin? I said, I won't hire him because of my respect for Kelvin. Kelvin and I have known each other longer than I've known Rodney. So if he goes to Oklahoma, I wouldn't even ask Kelvin to talk to him.

So Rodney, I'm telling you right here, turned it down, and a year later we hired him. He came in and worked extremely hard, a very detailed person. He's going to dot the I's, cross the T's, and he's intense. He's a guy that's going to talk a lot about his teams being tough, hard-nosed.

But he did a lot of things because the one thing that we've always done, I've always told every guy we've ever hired, we're not trying to hire recruiters, but we want guys that do recruit. We want coaches, and we want every guy to get up every day like it's his program and work that way, and Rodney did that. I knew he was going to do his job, just like all the guys that I've had with me. He did a great job of helping us win a lot of games.

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