

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Texas vs Tennessee

Saturday, March 23, 2024
Charlotte, North Carolina, USA
Spectrum Center

Tennessee Volunteers Rick Barnes Dalton Knecht Josiah-Jordan James Tobe Awaka Media Conference

Tennessee - 62, Texas - 58

RICK BARNES: Really just an incredible effort by both teams. Exactly the way we described the game to our players getting ready for this game. Obviously I do certainly have the utmost respect and our team does for the University of Texas and our program, and the fact that so many guys on that bench that have been a huge part of my life I'm thankful for.

But proud of the effort. These are the kinds of games in the tournament you get bounced when you shoot as poorly as we did, but we found a way with our defense. The ten extra shots that we got were obviously important to us, but to shoot the ball as poorly as we did, and all we kept talking about during timeouts was keep taking our shots. We've got to get it done on the defensive end.

Again, they run some really good stuff. We felt, if we did what we needed to do, they would end up going to their matchup zone. We got looks out of it, we didn't convert it. Yet we kept our poise, and they got really aggressive there at the end trying to drive it downhill.

Again, just really proud of our team and the way they stayed with it on a night where we just struggled shooting the ball.

Q. Dalton, what was that moment like at the end of the game, ball in your hands, kind of game on the line?

DALTON KNECHT: I wanted the ball in my I hands. I told



Z that when we were walking out of that timeout, saying I want the ball in my hands. He had trust in me, as well as the whole team had trust in me. Despite my shooting performance today, they had trust in me to go take those shots, and I can't thank my teammates and coaching staff enough.

Q. Tobe, you scored eight quick points at a time when Tennessee was struggling to score. How big of a boost do you think that gave the team in the first 20 minutes?

TOBE AWAKA: I think it definitely gave us a boost. I think overall my mindset was to just play aggressive but composed. Obviously I got in some foul trouble. I think it's a credit to our guards finding me in the right place and making it easy for me to score.

Q. Any of you can kind of answer this, but I wanted to direct it to Dalton. After you hit that three a little under six minutes left, it looked like you took this big sigh of relief, kind of shook your head like, where's it been all game? What's it like when you're kind of going through -- I'm sure you felt not that different from a normal game, but when the shots aren't falling that way, how do you kind of manage that mentally?

DALTON KNECHT: I just said, thank you, finally I seen one go down. I'm not really too focused on that because scoring is -- you know, it's all right, but you've got to lock up on the other end. That's what I was trying to focus on the most when my shots weren't falling and trying to do the little things that could impact the game, like rebounding and things like that, setting screens.

Q. Tobe, I know Coach Barnes usually when you get two fouls you're done for the half. Were you surprised to go back in?

TOBE AWAKA: Yeah, I asked him for another chance after I got that second one to put me back in. I don't think he realized I had a second one. I obviously picked up that third unfortunately, but I think it's just a testament to the trust I'm given.

Q. Dalton, anything defensively that they were doing differently? It looked like you maybe didn't get as many touches early on. Was that the way the game went, or were they doing something to deny you that much?

DALTON KNECHT: They were just playing physical defense. They were just running me off my screens and stuff and hedging the balls, making ball screens, and making everything just super tough for me, contesting my shots. They played great team defense. They were in the gaps.

Just get ready to go watch film with Coach and just learn from it, learn to be that much better and just get better.

Q. Josiah, you hadn't hit a three in a couple games. I don't even think you took one Thursday. For you to raise up and hit that one, it was a huge shot with just under three minutes left. What's going through your mind and what's your confidence level like as a player to take that shot in that situation?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: My confidence level, first and foremost, it comes from the work I put in. Each and every guy here, we believe we're the hardest working team in the country. When we get in situations like that, you've just got to rely on your work.

Obviously my confidence comes from my coaches and my teammates. Every timeout, every huddle, they're telling everybody to be aggressive and stay confident. It just goes back to my work and obviously my teammates.

Q. Josiah, Zakai didn't come off the floor tonight, played 40 minutes. What does it say about his passion and will to win in the tournament?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: There was one point I think it was second half and I was on the bench, and Coach said, you good? Zakai looked at him kind of crazy like, of course I'm good. Why would you even ask me something like that?

He's just a super hero. We wouldn't be in this position without his leadership, his aggressiveness. He's the engine that ignites us. We thrive off of him. For him to play 40 minutes in a situation like this, I don't think he'd want to have it any other way. That's just a testament to how tough he is.

Q. For Dalton, a few days ago you were saying that you were just kind of trying to take in the experience of playing in the NCAA Tournament. Now that you've had two games, you and Tennessee are looking to snap a

streak of not making it to the Elite Eight, how have you kind of felt you've adjusted to playing in these games? What have you learned from these first two that you think can help carry over to the next few?

DALTON KNECHT: Just be a lot more physical. It's a grown man's game. Just be ready to go out and give the first hit and just keep learning in film with Coach Barnes and the rest of the coaching staff, as well as just going out there and competing with my teammates. You know, we're just going out there hooping and stuff.

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with questions for Coach.

Q. Coach, you said there are a lot of special people on the other side of the bench. Now that the dust has settled, how special was this weekend for you considering where this regional was and how it shook out for you guys?

RICK BARNES: Well, my first year in college coaching as a volunteer at Davidson -- my very first year as a volunteer assistant, we played at the Charlotte Coliseum, and we won our first game there against Brown. I still have that watch that said -- and we were the Charlotte Invitational Champions. That was our goal coming here.

I said, we're in the Charlotte Invitational Tournament right now. There's four teams.

Again, I can't tell you how much respect I have for -- I could talk all night about Texas and their staff. I'm looking at one of my favorite players sitting right there, it was the first high school player we signed at the University of Texas, Chris Ogden, and he's truly like a son to me.

The game played exactly how -- I knew they were going to play so hard. They knew we were going to play hard. They did an incredible job on Dalton, and we knew shots were going to be hard to come by. We did feel if maybe we could get inside a little bit, thought we could get them into some ball screen.

We had some looks, and we knew they were going to go to a matchup at some point. We knew that was coming because the last time we played them we saw it. We got the shots that we thought we could get out of it and some back cuts.

Again, just so you know, that tournament was probably about 45 years ago, whatever it was, as long as I've been in it. Just proud of our team. Really proud of the effort of both teams. I thought both teams played their hearts out. To win a game like this when you shoot as poorly as we



did -- and they had something to do with that. Again, I don't -- there was some shots we forced, but their defense was there.

To win a game like this in this tournament, again, I'm just proud of the effort our guys put in there on the defensive end.

Q. Rick, Josiah just told that story about you asking Zakai if he needed a break and he looked at you like you're crazy. Talk about what Zakai playing 40 minutes did for this team tonight.

RICK BARNES: I will tell you this, the most -- and the coaches will learn to say it to me a certain way. They'll say to me, hey, Coach, it's 12:15 on the clock, 16 or whatever, do you think we should get Zakai out? And my answer is, "I'll ask him." I'll look at him.

He's an iron man. He never takes himself out in practice. Believe me, we practice hard. I asked him, I said, you good? You good? And I trust him.

Even though he had a tough night shooting the ball, it's just the little things that he does out there. The one stat that was probably good for us, I think their guards turned it over ten times, and we got ten extra shots. And the points off the turnovers was really probably the difference in the game really.

But his pressure defensively -- but to answer that question, he was tired because they had a rim shot on that last possession down there, and he was the guy that didn't block out. And he knows I'm going to get him for it because we kept talking about we can't ever leave this tournament with somebody not blocking out. We were fortunate they missed that follow-up there at the end.

Q. Coach, you stole my thunder a little bit, you mentioned it, you talked yesterday a lot about sometimes you don't shoot the ball well but you play well, and people don't realize it. Was this just a classic example of that?

RICK BARNES: I think we played well defensively. Again, they do some really good things. We wanted to take away the paint. We were obviously concerned about Abmas, and I think Mashack did a good job. Santi did. We lost him one time. He does a really good job of some things we were concerned about.

We saw that a lot of people wouldn't guard -- let me make sure I get it right. Dillon Mitchell, we were going to guard him. We believe in ball pressure. We watch a lot of teams stay back and he does a good job. They got him really

dribbling that, letting him come off and give some separation. We only gave that to him one time, and he hit it. That was a big play at that point in time for them.

Again, we just kept talking about we're going to put it on our defense. We've got to take the shots when we get him, but we've got to put it on -- they did some good stuff at the end of the game getting downhill. Z missed his closeout, and Tyrese went by him for some layups, and we gave him a couple no-pass paint touches, which you can't give to anyone.

Overall, it's exactly the kind of game we thought it would play out to be.

Q. Rick, I know that coaches say that there's no secrets this time of year because there's so much tape and so much access to knowing stuff. In a game like this with how well you all know each other, how difficult would it be to sort of throw something the other wouldn't expect?

RICK BARNES: Well, you can, but again, even with that, they play so hard. We play hard. You know, you expect players to be able to adjust. We did something that they probably hadn't seen us do much. Honestly, I watched it. I saw it on film today, where we went to a naked side ball screen right there at the elbow area. We watched that actually in one of their games late in the year, and we hadn't done much of that. We got a lot out of it.

That's when they decided to go zone, but we didn't show it in the first half. We wanted to get some stuff, and we got some action out of it.

Q. Rick, Tom Izzo was in here yesterday and was asked about you and this matchup, and he thought maybe you weren't appreciated enough during your time in Texas. I know you love the guys on the other side of the bench, but just given the way this ended there and getting this win, is there any part of you that says it's a little sweeter than normal?

RICK BARNES: Honestly, not really. I do think that -- haven't we played three years in a row? We played three years in a row. We went there, and they came here. Hard game before they closed down the Erwin Center. That was different because I never coached in the Erwin Center, but last year they came in and this year.

What it's become is it's become a really good rivalry in the league because they're coming into the league. Honestly, I don't -- and I don't want somebody to think I'm being disrespectful, but I've been away nine years, and that's a long time really in this sport. I'm happy for Texas and the

staff they have because, one, I know how much those guys love that university. I mean, that guy right there born and bred a Texan, and I know how much it meant to him to give up a head coaching job to go back because they wanted to build on and try to put the family back together that was there for 17 years. I think they saw that.

I think T.J. was here tonight, wasn't he? He left. I know he texted me. But today I got a lot of texts this afternoon from a lot of my former players, and I'm -- you know, there's a love affair there and a family that -- and I'm part of that family, and I always will be. But I'm just thankful that God has blessed me with the opportunity to be at a lot of great universities, 17 years there, now 9 here at Tennessee. Honestly, I couldn't be in a better place than I am right now.

Again, it is what it is. I'm just excited we're moving on because a year ago we were a good team. Zakai went down, and we really had to recreate ourself at the end of the year. We won games like this to get to the Sweet 16 a year ago. We struggled to score, but we won these kind of games. Actually, the older guys kept saying, we've been here before. We know what we've got to do.

I've got to believe, and I'm certainly hoping -- it seems like the lid has been on the basket the last two weeks. Whether people believe it or not, I think we can shoot the ball. If we can do that, it will give us obviously a chance.

We got here. We came here to win this tournament and these four teams and we get a chance to move on.

I just have so much respect -- I said it yesterday, and I said it to the St. Peter's program, you get to this tournament, you've got a lot to be proud of, I don't care who it is.

But I love Tom Izzo. He and I got in this together. He does -- as soon as he lost the game, he came in that locker room and hugged me, and I hugged him. We've grown up in this business together, and he's a guy that has done it the right way all the time. You couldn't ask for a better guy to represent your university. He'd have been successful wherever he went. He's a legend, an institution there at Michigan State.

There aren't many of us left of that era, but I'm just, again, thank God for the opportunities He's given me and The blessings because it really is a blessing.

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