

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Miami (OH) vs Tennessee

Friday, March 20, 2026

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Xfinity Mobile Arena

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Rick Barnes

J.P. Estrella

Ja'Kobi Gillespie

Media Conference

Tennessee 78, Miami Ohio 56

THE MODERATOR: We welcome Coach Barnes, Ja'Kobi Gillespie and J.P. Estrella. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach.

RICK BARNES: First of all, I really want to congratulate Coach Steele and his team on an incredible year. Any team that wins that many games, and it took maybe our best half of the year, the start of the game to beat them today, but hats off to them as we were getting ready for them basically yesterday, and you just had to be so impressed with how they played together. They put on a show in Dayton, but, again, congratulations to them.

Really proud of our team. Ja'Kobi was phenomenal today, not just making shots, but really running the team and helping us be effective on the offensive end. But our defense, in some ways, them making those early threes, woke us up. We practiced getting out there yesterday, but we didn't get out there early.

After they hit those, our guys realized we better get out there. That helped us, obviously, once we were able to get out there and stretch them out there a little bit further. I thought our guys did a decent job when you spread out like that, not getting back cut. I can't say enough about Peter Suder. He's the real deal. We couldn't do anything with him, he was terrific. Just proud of our effort, proud of our team and what we were able to get done defensively.

Q. You guys have had a lot of close losses this season in tightly contested games. What does it do for your confidence moving forward into the tournament



when you win a blowout game like that start to finish over a very good team?

J.P. ESTRELLA: Yeah, they're a really good team. We just did good confidence-wise, like you said. And it's going to keep building throughout this tournament. We just have to make sure we keep playing our brand of basketball and keep playing confident, and that's, hopefully, going to get us deeper in the tournament.

Q. J.P., how is the ankle; and Ja'Kobi, is it more than shots?

J.P. ESTRELLA: The ankle is good, yeah, it's good.

JA'KOBİ GILLESPIE: It felt good to see one go through and to have my teammates finding me, and I was able to start finding them. It was good to have a flow on offense going.

Q. As someone that's been part of a mid-major program at Belmont, for you to see what Miami was able to do this season, 32 games, galvanize the community around their grade school like that, what does that say about the power of mid-major basketball?

JA'KOBİ GILLESPIE: Yeah, it's good basketball. They were a really good team. We prepared like any other team to play them. Being around it, it's still basketball, and it's a good program at that mid-major level.

Q. Rick said that was maybe your best first half of basketball. Why do you think that was your best first half?

JA'KOBİ GILLESPIE: I felt like we were just guarding them. They came out and hit a lot of early shots. After that, I feel like we shut them down and we were able to really guard them.

J.P. ESTRELLA: Yeah, like Kobi said, we got into our flow defensively. We did a good job in our gaps. I felt like, finished possessions with rebounds, which lead to early offense and transition offense for us.

Q. Looked like you had a chance to get 30 there at the

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end and you kind of, I don't know if it was an alley-oop.

RICK BARNES: He thought he was going to dunk it? He can't dunk in traffic. (Laughter).

Q. Yeah, why didn't you just --

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: In the gap, somebody hit my arm, I think.

Q. So that was not a pass, you were trying to go for it?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Yeah, I was trying to dunk it. Yeah, when he wound up, I knew he was going to do something I knew he couldn't do.

Q. Did it give you a sense that Ja'Kobi was going to have one of these big games?

J.P. ESTRELLA: Yeah, just early when he was making a ton of shots, and we see it every day in practice. When he starts making shots, he's unstoppable to guard him. When we get him in a flow, there's nothing teams can really do about him.

Q. With the fan base that Miami has getting rowdy in there, how do you feel that your fans from Tennessee brought the energy to match that and really help you guys great some of that energy?

J.P. ESTRELLA: Absolutely. Our fans travel with us everywhere. We've got the best fan base in the country and they're making sure they support us 100% throughout the way.

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Same as he said, and it was cool to see how their fan base is. They travel too.

Q. You guys can play the way you did and Nate didn't make a shot, I think he played 18 minutes, that you can still play and have that kind of success without him?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: He affects winning even if he's not making shots when he's on the floor, so I don't think that really -- if we're playing good, we're playing good.

THE MODERATOR: All right, we'll let the student-athletes go back to the locker room.

Questions for Coach Barnes.

Q. Your team shot 53% from the field, from three. Patience on offense, the shot selection. How did it improve so much from that loss against Vanderbilt?

RICK BARNES: We really wanted to establish inside. That's not just going to the big guys. We felt like we got it in there they would double, which they did. But then Ja'Kobi, when he gets going like that, we're going to let him go with it, but it was our defense. Early getting out in transition, deflections and going out, getting some of those baskets without having to play against a set defense is always important.

They went zone there, and I think the reason they probably came out of it, I think we came up on that possession with three offensive rebounds. It's hard and we obviously had the size advantage in there.

Really everything that we did well today stemmed from our defense. It really did. It got us in a flow. We felt like we could spread them out a little bit and get some of those lobs we were getting early and felt like we could make the right read. It would be hard for them to get up there and get them but a good all around game. 16 turnovers are too many and self-induced. We can't get back to doing that.

Q. Virginia, very different team from the last time you saw them years ago. What challenge do they pose for you Sunday?

RICK BARNES: I really don't know. I haven't looked at them. I have a lot of unbelievable respect for Ryan Odom. I feel in the game. Ryan is a terrific coach. He spent a year at my alma mater, Lenoire-Rhyne. He's a great coach, basketball coach and quickly put Virginia back where they want to be. I know just from the brief time talking to my coaches, they can really score the basketball at all five positions. They know how to play. They know what they're doing, obviously, but we'll get -- we obviously did work on them before we got here, but watching the game today, we'll start on it tomorrow with them.

Q. We saw Nate go down the tunnel at one point. I think he only played five minutes of the second half. Where's his health right now? Is there a concern?

RICK BARNES: Well, I've said it. Nate would play every minute of every game if he could. He's not going to be 100% healthy until the season is over because he had that ankle sprain where he had it. He tries. I was watching him in practice just doing some basic stuff and he never says a word but I could see on his face he was wincing a little bit. When we had the lead, right now he needs as much rest as he can, but he'll do everything he can To be ready. He will be ready to do what he can do.

Q. 30th NCAA Tournament. You have been in this --

RICK BARNES: Longer than you've been living. You can

say it, it won't offend me.

Q. Like, is it still special to you being in this tournament? How do you keep it that way through all these years?

RICK BARNES: Well, it is special to be here. I think this is the greatest supporting event in our country. For three weeks, it captivates the country. Every state is part of it. It goes east to west, north to south. I know how hard it is to get here. I have the best athletic director in the country who wants us to be competitive, and he's given us everything that we need to do. We got a great coaching staff. Every year is a different challenge, but you start out the year -- every team in the country starts out wanting to be in this tournament.

It's something you never take for granted. The first one is the hardest one. I don't care who you play, it's always the hardest game and you watch that. One of the hardest things, believe it or not, is sitting in the locker room as long as you do at halftime. A lot of people don't realize it's really tough. After that, we just hit it all head on. We can't let this take away our momentum. We have to come back, but it's different, longer time-outs, all those type of things.

But it's special because I thank God for -- he's blessed me so many great jobs, players, administrators, and I know our fan base here, everybody talks about their fan base being the best. I know our first year at Tennessee, we were terrible and we played in front of 16,000 people almost every night and not many people can talk about that.

I just thank God for the blessing of being here and I'm blessed. But it's something, obviously, as a coach, love our players and thankful that my family has been able to hang in here with me all this long.

Q. Coach, obviously Miami started the game with a couple of tough contested threes. In a tournament where so many upsets happen so frequently, a lot of coaches would be quick to hit the panic button. What did you say to your team to get it under control after that tough start?

RICK BARNES: They weren't contested the way we would call a contested shot. It's really interesting, yesterday, and even today we practiced at the 76ers facility and one thing I learned about that game, wherever that three-point line is, that's where players play. We talked about, we show them against SMU where they were able to dribble up to the line, and I'm not picking on SMU, every team plays differently. We felt like the battle picked up, had to be right at half-court. Yesterday at the Sixers, that puts you out there. We started the game today, we weren't out there. They

shot those shots, and I think our guys realized, hey, we better get out there and we did.

They're capable of making them, obviously, which they have proven that. Our guards did a pretty good job trying to get off the screens. They're really a well-coached team. They have really good counters. They move you and play with speed. From a coaching standpoint, we were really concerned because this time of year, again, you see it every year in this tournament. This can bring out the best and worst in things and some crazy things happen, but I really do think the fact they made those early woke us up, and we realized we better get out there.

Q. It's been a while since you guys weren't one of the top seeds in this tournament. Do you think you guys, and probably even entering today, you were the lesser talked about between these two teams. Do you think you can embrace an underdog role for once?

RICK BARNES: I don't know. The standard general mind, we don't look at ourselves like that. But Miami of Ohio should have been the darlings, the talk of the tournament. You win 32 basketball games, I don't care what league you play in. I don't care what anybody says. And they would win some games in our league, make no bones about it, but this game is a difficult in.

You have guys who have never been in it. You don't know how they're going to respond. You really don't. In terms of, I don't know, underdog this or that. I know we'll wear the dark jerseys, I guess, from here on out, which if it plays like normal, fans normally pull for the dark jerseys. So maybe we'll pick up more fans along the way, know who we are and again, believe me, J.P. and Ja'Kobi said it. We prepare for these guys today like we did anybody else. We gave them the utmost respect in terms of knowing if we weren't good today, they would beat us. We've got to take that approach from here on out, obviously.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, coach.

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