

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA  
Xfinity Mobile Arena

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes Felix Okpara Bishop Boswell

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We will go to questions for either of the student-athletes. Questions for either of the student athletes?

**Q. One of the big staples of these Rick Barnes teams is the physicality that you guys have. You see in this tournament when there's a lot of teams who have this physicality advantage and don't really use it. You did a really good job of asserting your will yesterday. Can you speak to that culture of physicality and the success that it brings you in this type of environment?**

FELIX OKPARA: I just say, like you said, it's a culture and it's something we have done since the summer, since we got together and this is something we continue to do every time we play. We pride ourselves any time we go into the game to be one of the hardest playing teams in the country. Regardless of who we play, we're still going to bring it.

BISHOP BOSWELL: Yeah, it's just a system to our strength trainer, Gary. We put a lot of work in the summer being physically prepared and we knew we had the size advantage on them so we look to attack that, so.

**Q. Bishop, for you specifically, two questions. How did you feel yesterday after having a weak off. Were you able to recharge the batteries and have extra pep to your step? And the second thing is, how early in the ball game can you tell that Ja'Kobi is locked in and can really have an explosive game like you did yesterday?**

BISHOP BOSWELL: Yeah, I think a little bit of a break



was good, definitely having those SEC tournament games where you're playing back to back days but got some guys healthy that were dealing with injuries and things like that so I think that was good and with Kobi, once you see those first two go in and touch nothing but net, you kind of know he's got it going. It's our job to keep feeding him, and also his ability to get others involved as well.

**Q. For both of you, how much did last year's run influence what you guys are doing now and that hunger to get to that Final Four?**

BISHOP BOSWELL: Yeah, we were blessed to be behind some veteran guys last year. For me as a freshman last year being able to see it, see what it takes to win at this level. Every game is going to be a grind. So I think that gave me a good perspective going into it this year, being able to talk to the younger guys about that.

FELIX OKPARA: I would say part of the team last year, the big run, it was a fire that we had in us, and I feel like we still need to -- we have unfinished business. Just being an older guy, too, seeing last year, just telling the young guys what it takes, just being a good leader, going all the way to the Final Four.

**Q. Felix, for you specifically, what do you do in Virginia? I'm not sure how much prep you guys have done as a team for them, but what do you know about them and the challenges they might bring to the table?**

FELIX OKPARA: They're a very well-coached team. We know they love to play in transition and want to shoot early threes, and also I feel like they have size just like how we do. I think it's going to boil down to the guys, who is more physical, and I feel that's going to be a good match-up.

**Q. Question for Bishop, why do you think that Ja'Kobi is able to see the floor as well as he is right now?**

BISHOP BOSWELL: He's super quick getting downhill. I think a lot of it has to do with the bigs, them setting up those screens allows him to get downhill. And after that, when they're running as hard as they do to the rim, it's hard to not see him a lot of times. He draws so much attention, people are really helping in, so he's able to kick out and get others involved when he doesn't have a shot, so.



**Q. Bishop, in terms of the three-point ball, there's a lot of talk about Miami Ohio and what they did with their three-point shooting, you did a great job against them. What are the differences in what Virginia does offensively with the way they shoot the three ball versus what you guys were just able to do against Miami Ohio?**

BISHOP BOSWELL: Yeah, it's similar. They put up around 30 threes a game or something like that. They're also doing a job attacking it early if they have the open three, so I think kind of just the same thing as we kind of did last game, just being in gaps early and playing out, guarding the three-point line as best we can, but they're balanced so just trying to take away as much as we can.

**Q. This question is for Bishop. The SEC has some of the best guards in the country with guys like Philon, Acuff. How does that conference best prepare you for deep guard row occasions like Virginia who has a guy like Jacari White off the bench putting up 26 points?**

BISHOP BOSWELL: Yeah, Virginia has a lot of good guards. The SEC is the best conference in the world for basketball. Every night we have a challenge, whether it's Acuff or Mississippi State with Josh Hubbard. Every night we're in for a challenge, and I think it's good to be prepared for where we are now.

THE MODERATOR: All right, you're excused. We'll see you tomorrow on the court.

We'll get started here with Coach Barnes. Coach, why don't we start with an opening statement.

RICK BARNES: Excited to have another opportunity to play, and we know we have a terrific opponent in Virginia. They have had an incredible year, a 30-win team that they know what it takes to win. They can hurt you in so many different ways, and we know that we're going to have to really be on top of our game and, but it's here and we got to be ready to go.

**Q. Looking at your opponent, there's a guard for Wright State that was able to impact their offense in the perimeter. Ja'Kobi is really good at doing that himself. I want to ask you about the confidence you have in him being able to impact the game with active hands and how that bodes for you in this match-up.**

RICK BARNES: Ja'Kobi has had a terrific year and certainly one of the best players in college basketball. We put a lot on him this year. We've asked a lot from him and he's far exceeded that in so many different ways. We saw

what he did last night. We have seen him do that offensively. He's very quick. He has great anticipation skills, and that's going up against teams that have worked really hard at trying to get the ball out of his hand, trying to keep him from catching the ball because people know how important he is to us. He has to work so hard in so many different areas. His teammates recognize that. Coaching staff, we do, and we need to all help him as much as we can because we need him to play at that level.

**Q. Looking at Jacari White for Virginia, obviously a very good outside shooter, he's showing the second half of the season, more of a willing to drive to the basket. What kind of challenges does he present for a defensive match-up?**

RICK BARNES: He played a terrific game. I think they would say he impacted the game for them yesterday the way Ja'Kobi did for us. Get up off the ground, get a shot off any time he wants it. What was impressive is when they pushed out on him, he was able to get by, made some terrific layups, Some nice shots off the back board.

So it presents a challenge, and we like our individual defense. We think we have guys who can guard the ball, but we have never asked a guy to guard anyone of that caliber one-on-one. It has to be a team defense and we have to have that again tomorrow.

**Q. I was wondering, Ryan coached at your alma mater and you had Bryce Crawford on your staff at Texas. What do you remember about talking to those guys and obviously working with Bryce?**

RICK BARNES: It goes back even further than that. Dave Odom, Ryan's father and I have known each other for a long time, and his wife, Lynn, being in the ACC for that long, we all, myself, Dave, Kelvin Sampson and Tubby Smith, we all played in the same league in the Carolinas back in the day. So I feel like I have known Ryan forever. He's done a terrific job. He was only at Lenoir-Rhyne for a year, but was terrific. He really did a great job.

Then Bryce, somebody that I have the utmost respect for, he loves the Lord, happy for he -- I'm happy for all of him because I know how hard they've worked in this business and Ryan going from UMBC, coming up the way I think coaches probably should to understand every level of it, and Virginia did a great job of hiring him as their head coach, and obviously, bringing Bryce is something that Ryan's always been very loyal to his staff.

**Q. By the nature of how the schedule plays out, tomorrow being a night game, he has some time. Today, obviously, and tomorrow, are you the kind of**

**coach who would want to be in the hotel the whole time working with your guys or do you take them out to see some of the cultural sights in town?**

RICK BARNES: No. We're not going to see the cultural things. We might show them Rocky or something. No, we had dinner last night, and the treatments that we do, we're in our routine, what we do wherever we travel to, and introduced them to some things about Virginia last night, and then got up today, let them sleep in a little bit, and we prepped the way we would if we were on the road to play someone else.

We're here to do this. We'll get back and go at it like we do. We have been at it a long time, but the families are around. They get to spend time. It's not like we lock them down. We want them to get out. I have a tremendous coaching staff. They work around the clock to keep going and they won't stop until we feel like we need everything that we need. But in terms of organize things with our team, we don't do that.

**Q. Rick, you talked about Ja'Kobi so far, but why do you believe he's seeing the floor as well as he has been lately, especially this last game?**

RICK BARNES: That's a good question, and I'm not sure I have the answer for you other than he's been through a lot. He's seen a lot. He's seen more than he's probably seen in his life. I spoke about it many times this year. So much of what he's gone through this year is new to him. He's never played with -- it took him a while to understand, to play with a lob threat. And the fact that he's got some guys he can do that. Earlier in the year, he had one more before Cade went down. He had always been more of a pocket pass kind of a guy. He made a couple of those last night.

We put a lot own our point guard. He's the guy driving the car. He's learned over the last months, he knows when he's or not interstate and he knows when he's in the city now. It took a while for him to figure that out, but he's learned to handle the different speeds he needs to play with.

**Q. Coach, offensive rebounding and second-chance points has been a huge, huge piece of your success so far this year. With Virginia and the height they have on the this side with De Ridder and Grunloh and the shot blocking, blocking, what challenges do you think that will pose to your group, and how do you find success against the trees they have on the inside.**

RICK BARNES: They're top ten in the country at rebounding the basketball, something that both teams do, and it will be part of the game that they're going to continue

to try to get there. We're going to try to keep them from getting there, and they're going to try to keep us from getting there. They're a terrific team, a physical team. People might say you look at their size, our size, but both teams are physical. I think it's going to be that type of basketball game.

**Q. With Bishop yesterday, what did you see from him with a week off in between games in terms of his energy level, recharging the batteries, the turnovers, the fouls, things like that. What did you see in his game yesterday?**

RICK BARNES: He's been dealing with a little bit of a hip flexor. He turned it over more yesterday than he should, but defensively, he was locked in with what I needed him to do, and we need that from him every night. If he does that, he's just instinctively, offensively some things will happen for him because of the way we play, the way we move the ball, but we need him. We never every one of our guards.

We even put Clarence out there who hasn't played very much, but we did it because he's been so good all year long with his effort. We just haven't been able to get him in games. This time of year, you have to have everybody ready. So much of it depends on when we're doing our prep. If we think guys are really locked in, know what we're trying to do, and every one of them has to be prepared. If we don't feel like we're getting that from our prep, we might not play them. But if we get it, we're going to play them because we need them all, and we need Bishop to come back and do what -- when he's locked in defensively, that's when he plays his best basketball.

**Q. With Nate's limitations, how does that change the way he plays the game, the way he attacks while compensating for the injuries?**

RICK BARNES: It's a problem. Nate is one of the toughest kids I have ever coached. We played every minute ever since he hurt his ankle in the Alabama game and got his knee rolled up on. Doctors knew we had to get him as healthy as we possibly could, but when you have a sprain the nature that he has, it won't be healthy until he gets time off at the end of the year.

A lot of guys this time of year have to play with those type things, and in terms of how we're going to play, he'll play the way he plays. Like last night, we could tell he was struggling with it. That's why we didn't put him back in the game. Thankful that we had the lead that we had, but we did have some other guys that really stepped in and played well.

We need Nate. He knows it, but he will give us everything

that he can, and that's really all I can say about it. If it's up to him, he would play every minute if he could. We'll see game time.

**Q. Rick, your history with Virginia goes back decades, and you nearly became the coach at Virginia. I'm wondering if in an idle moment, have you ever thought about, gee, what might have happened had you decided to go to Charlottesville? You ended up in the ACC anyway, but if you had taken the job then how things might have changed?**

RICK BARNES: You know, it's been a long time ago, but I grew up in North Carolina, grew up all ACC basketball. That's all I knew. Like anybody, I knew about North Carolina and the Big Four, and once I got my full time job at George Mason, I fell in love with the state of Virginia. I spent so much time recruiting that state and had the chance to go and did accept a job, and then decided it wasn't the right time, the right thing to do, and I don't think I thought about it since.

It's a long story, but God has just taken care of me, I can tell you. Every step I've taken, I think he's sovereign over all that. I just know I've been blessed everywhere I've been. I have had so many really good jobs. I look back, I've made more mistakes than I can even tell you I've made, but through that whole time, I know the good Lord carried me through it. Believe me, I made a lot of mistakes. The Virginia thing wasn't part of the plan and, like I said, I ended up at Clemson, on to Texas and to Tennessee. I'm a truly blessed man and I thank God for that.

**Q. Coach, I realize it's early in this tournament, but the run you went on last year in March, have you seen that have any impact on the first game or the mindset coming into this year?**

RICK BARNES: Every year is different, and people talk about the first game being the hardest game, and they're difficult games because we have seen this tournament bring out the best, sometimes the worst. It creates things -- you see people do things you can't believe it, maybe good or bad, but you know that once you get going, every game goes up. The spotlight, more teams, less teams, more spotlight on those teams, but it still gets back to, you have to play good basketball.

All the outside noise, all that, you want your players to enjoy it. You really do. Their families are around. It's the climax of the season. The goal is to be here. The goal is to be the last team standing on Monday night, but every team is different. Some of these guys, this is the first time for it. Some of them, they've gone through it. Do I think it

helps when you have retention on your team? I do. I thought that carried our last two teams. We had guys that knew what it was about, was able to build on it from game to game and understood that what happened yesterday is over and done with. You got to let it go quick and move on to the next one at an even higher level.

It's hard, and you have to really focus in on playing basketball. You do want your guys to enjoy this time, and they do enjoy it, but we know that it's going to end suddenly if you don't do what you need to do to advance.

**Q. I'm curious, the Virginia players were talking about your team's physicality and said they struggled some in their first meeting with Duke and Miami in terms of physicality. How do you get your guys to make sure they come out with that physicality that you guys have been known for?**

RICK BARNES: We do it every day. We go against each other every day. We are who we are. Everybody is -- I think this time of year, we are who we are right now. I'm sure that Ryan is talking to his team. We're not going to show them anything they haven't seen up to this point. Personnel is important and all that, but what you really hope is that your players play their best basketball, and we have to be who we are. They're going to be who they are, and you hope there's no let down in that. You hope your habits eventually take over, and our habits are who we are and we hope that if we have done the right things, they're going to shine when we need them to shine.

**Q. You mentioned a little bit about recruiting the state of Virginia and you got a guy Nate Ament that you got from that state. What's made you successful getting players from that area because it's a very competitive place to try to get talent from.**

RICK BARNES: Well, again, I have to give me staff all the credit today for recruiting. They lead, push me where I need to go. Back when I started in the late 70s, early 80s, it was a lot different game than it is today. Still know a lot of people in that area, but Justin Gainey was the lead there. Steve McClain, who was at Texas at the time, spent a lot of time recruiting him. And when they made the decision to change staff there, we knew we were going to bring him on board with us. We have known Nate a lot, and he was a guy that once we saw him, and we really went at it with everything that we had, hoping that we would get him.

Arguably, he's not disappointed us in any way, shape, or form. He hasn't. But today, the success we have had in recruiting really belongs to the staff. I think I have the best coaching staff in the country. We're a highly experienced

staff, and I trust their evaluation with players. We evaluate players.

Obviously, you're going to do all the intel we can get but the final thing is going to come down to our evaluation and if they fit what we're trying to get done. If it's good for them, good for us, we want to make it happen.

**Q. I was going to ask you about your staff. You have always raved about them and you just did. This time of year, besides the recruiting aspect, but this time of year, how much of a difference-maker can a coaching staff make in helping make a deep run in the NCAA Tournament?**

RICK BARNES: I think I have a bunch of head coaches sitting on my bench. Steve McClain, who I just mentioned, won a national championship at hutch back in the day and Justin Gainey is ready to host any team at any level. Greg spent a lot of time in the NBA, 20 years, and you have Amara Morgan who this year and we got a steal there. He's already made a huge impact, whether it's Brian Lance in the Carolina conference, like we all did, played for him as a player, a coach at 22 years old, even Kim Caldwell's husband, who is on our staff in a different role. So I have a lot of experience on that bench. A lot. Our young GAs.

It's -- and I really rely on them a lot. I trust them. They work really well together. We have a lot of experience in a lot of different areas, and I think what we do in terms of evaluation, if guys really want to get good at basketball, we're the place for them because we take great pride in what we do in individual work. We also take great pride in finding guys that fit and guys that want to work. But, again, it all goes back to our staff. They're terrific.

I will say this: In today's game, you can't be successful unless you have a terrific athletic director. I think Danny White is the best athletic director in the country, and he would tell you he's got two of the best bosses in Randy Boyd and Donde Plowman who allow him to do what he needs to do.

There are a lot of wonderful things going on at Tennessee. The leadership from Danny has been phenomenal and what he's done in a short time is something that is really special to be a part of it.

**Q. You just mentioned how much the game has changed since you started in the 70s. How have you changed as a coach that's allowed you to continue having success?**

RICK BARNES: A lot, I mentioned earlier about my faith and when I talk about that, I really mean it because I look

back, I have made so many mistakes as a young head coach and I was blessed to have Dave Gavitt who founded the Big East. The Big East offices being in Providence. I did have a chance to often have lunch with Dave and he helped me, one of the first big lessons he taught me is how to deal with the media. He said you better have selective hearing and selective reading and the one thing he said to me that I have never forgotten, he said you need to understand as a coach those guys' jobs mean as much to them as your job means to you so you should treat everybody with respect. He said you should not be afraid to answer any question. Talk about it. I have had just great mentors along the way. But when I'm in my room by myself at night and thinking about where I am today, I know that God carried me every step of the way. It's hard to believe I was one of the youngest head coaches in the country. Now I'm one of the oldest. Believe me, I know the mistakes I've made. I could write a book about them. But I pray every day about it, I carry my cross with me everywhere I go to remind me that I'm only here for a short time and I want to make the most of it, and that's all to bring glory to His Kingdom.

I heard our governor do a speech last week at the National Prayer Breakfast. He said very few things in life matter. Get at it. There are very few things that really matter, and those are the things that you have to put your focus on, things you have to think about, and with me, it's my relationship with Jesus Christ, and I'm doing this. People ask me, when will you stop? He will make it clear.

I look back at my time at Texas, I thought I was finished up there. When I got fired there, I looked back and I told everybody that I think the AD that fired me, he was a messenger. I think God wanted me at Tennessee and it's been 10, 11 of the best years of my life, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

But that's where I am in my stage of life. If I went back to when I was a young coach, it was all about me. It's not about me anymore. It really isn't. I have learned that, and I learned it the hard way. I made so many mistakes. I'm just thankful that God has carried me through all this.

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