

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Tennessee State vs Iowa State

Friday, March 20, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Iowa State Cyclones

TJ Otzelberger

Killyan Toure

Dominick Nelson

Nate Heise

Media Conference

Iowa State 108, Tennessee State 74

MODERATOR: Head coach T.J. Otzelberger. Dominick Nelson, Nate Heise and Killyan Toure. Questions for T.J.

T.J. OTZELBERGER: It's important this time of the year that you focus on your habits, the consistency of those habits every day, and for us that involves pressuring the basketball, rebounding the ball at a high level and taking care of the basketball and sharing it. Thought our guys did a great job in those three areas for the most part here this afternoon, and as a result we were able to be successful.

Proud of our guys, how they continued to elevate their level of play and how they play for one another, and excited for the next opportunity.

Q. T.J., real quick, do you have an update on Joshua and what happened there?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. He has a sprained left ankle. We had an x-ray and the x-ray was negative. So we'll continue to reevaluate over the next day or two and just see where things are when we get to Sunday and we figure out what time we play.

Q. Coach, talk about how important the fans are. You have this journey that you go along in this tournament. How important they are to you and your team?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Our fanbase is the best in the country. They show up for us at home, on the road, on



neutral site games, in the conference tournament and the NCAA Tournament. So we get tremendous energy and feed off their passion at all times. Really fortunate to have the best fanbase in the country.

Q. Coach, towards the end of the game we saw a little bit more energy with some harder fouls. What were you talking about with the officials and how did that go?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. I mean, I just wanted to make sure that we kept the game under control and that I want to have our players' back and make sure I can look out for them in any way that we can. And it's important that when the game gets to a certain point, that we continue to focus on making sure that the safety of everybody involved is at the forefront.

So that was my communication.

Q. Just a couple of weeks ago you guys were shooting just a couple times a game. Today you had 25 and 22. What flipped for you guys to be more assertive offensively and go out there and have a game like you did today?

NATE HEISE: Really with all three of us up here that whenever our number is called, we're going to be ready and that's what we do in practice every day is we go at each other. Today when J-Jeff went down, we all knew different guys were going to have to make different plays. So we just were ready.

KILLYAN TOURE: Yeah. Like he said, during practice we all compete against each other and we are ready. We are ready to play and, yeah, today we stepped up because J-Jeff was down. And we just took the opportunities and we played pretty well today.

Q. Coach and any of the players, just initial thoughts on the match-up on Sunday and what you see from Kentucky and what it'll take to win.

DOMINICK NELSON: I mean, just being able to bring our physicality. That's that we try to do every single game and just create turnovers and play at our pace, be physical and that's really what we're trying to do.



T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. I would say all of our focus today was on this game. Tremendous respect for Coach Pope. He's a fantastic coach and we know what a great program they have. We know it's going to take our absolute best come Sunday and that's what we're going to prepare to do.

Q. Coach, we've known about Killyan's defense for quite some time. How much does it change things when he's rolling offensively? And Nate or Dominick, if you want to answer that as well?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think when you do the physical things in this game defensively and on the glass, it'll translate to offensively the same level of aggressiveness and physicality.

What we saw from Killyan, it started on the defensive end. It started with him being disruptive. It started with us getting out in transition and then you get your confidence going and then you play well. Obviously when you have 11 rebounds and 8 offensive rebounds from the guard position, it speaks to his competitive spirit, how hard he's playing, how physical he's playing and then that same level of physicality showed up for him offensively.

He's a tremendous worker. Somebody we're really proud of, a guy that we can count on. He just really stepped up for us here today.

DOMINICK NELSON: I'd say the same thing, just bringing that defensive energy, just helps him create better offense. Like we said, push in transition. Once you score one, all the confidence comes after that. So just being able to be physical and apply pressure defensively.

Q. What did you guys think when you saw Joshua hurt his left ankle, and now what's the mentality moving forward to potentially play without him if he's forced to miss some time?

DOMINICK NELSON: I just say next-man-up mentality. Obviously it sucks. He is one of our best players. But we just have to have that next man up. We all put in the work every single day. We all trust each other. We all see what we do day in and day out. So it's just a matter of showing it.

NATE HEISE: I would agree with that. Initially what happened you obviously don't know the severity of it. The way we all stepped up knowing that that's what he would have wanted. Just continue to fight for him and we all stepped up.

KILLYAN TOURE: Yeah. We are brothers, you know. So we will play for him, and yeah, everybody knows what they have to do during the game. So, yeah, we will keep playing hard, physical. And yeah, we will play for him.

Q. Coach and any player who wants to chime in, playing in the Big 12, the competition you had this year was pretty good. How did that prepare you for this Tournament?

NATE HEISE: Yeah. I think every game in the Big 12 is a challenge and the physicality the length and how good the players and coaches are. I think that tests you day in and day out. It's a long season, it's a long conference season. So that definitely brings a lot to this tournament as well, and we just do what we do. And whether that's force turnovers, get out in transition, all those things, I think the Big 12 really tests you well for that.

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. When you play in the best conference in the country, you're battle tested. You develop grit, competitive endurance and a level of toughness to be able to fight through adversity.

So those are attributes our team has built throughout the course of the season. It's a credit to the players and coaches in the Big 12 Conference, and it gives us tremendous confidence as we move forward.

Q. T.J., obviously the Joshua Jefferson injury happened early in the game. What did you like about the way your team handled that? And was there anything specific within the flow of the game that you thought you executed well without having Joshua on the floor?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Like we said, a lot of these guys stepped up. They've had more of a scoring role than maybe what they had some other times. I thought they took tremendous pride in still pressuring the ball, moving the ball, playing for one another. Joshua leads our team in assists, so we have to really move the ball and we have to be intentional on the glass to rebound without him.

He's an unbelievable player, unbelievable leader and not having him out there brought a lot of challenges, but proud of our guys how they stepped up and how they trusted and believed in one another.

Q. T.J., season high 19 minutes for Dom Nelson today. What did you think of his contributions off the bench and his ability to respond when his number was called?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I thought he played great. He had

terrific energy. I think it starts defensively. When you're disruptive, getting out in transition, that's where he's at his best. So he did that.

He had a lot of opportunities today where he was playing the point guard and running our team and did a great job of it. So it should give him confidence as we continue to move forward when his name is called or his number is called and he's continued to work even if he didn't get the minutes. So he's stayed prepared for this moment.

Q. T.J., you guys played a little differently with Dominick getting more minutes after J-Jeff went out, playing a little smaller. Get into kind of how you guys played without him in there and did you maybe have to change some things up with the game plan?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. I think we practice and prepare in such a way that when adversity hits, that we're prepared for it. So I think, again, schematically it wasn't as much as move the ball. We've got some speed out there. We got four-guard line ups, attack the close-outs. Hunt the shot opportunities. Switching some things defensively, some versatility.

So we didn't overthink it. We practice in such a way every day to prepare for anything that comes our way, and I was just happy that our guys stepped up when their numbers were called.

Q. Coach, in the locker room Blake Buchanan talked about how important it was for you guys to continue practicing hard, to carry the momentum from KC into St. Louis. How did you see your team respond to that and bring the positive momentum from the conference tournament to the NCAA Tournament?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: We talked about that was our best stretch of three games in a row of play all year long. You want to be playing your best in March. And our guys work incredibly hard every single day, the consistency of their habits, to put themselves in that position to do that.

So we want to keep getting better. This is a time of the year, like we're proud of what we've accomplished, but we still know our best is in front of us. So we're going to continue to work. We're going to work hard on the practice court. We're going to be demanding, and our best is yet to come.

Q. T.J., how much better is your team when Killyan and Nate are being assertive offensively, like they have been the last couple weeks?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: They know we have tremendous

confidence and belief in them. And I think they understood today without J-Jeff what we needed and that they needed to step up. It's our job as coaches to continue to give them solutions and confidence, and then we trust them. We believe in them. We know what they can do every single day. We see it.

So it was great that their habits, their work, the trust from their teammates had showed up and they played great today offensively.

MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much for your time. Congratulations.

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