

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Creighton vs Tennessee

Thursday, March 28, 2024

Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

## Tennessee Volunteers

**Rick Barnes**

**Dalton Knecht**

**Jonas Aidoo**

**Jahmai Mashack**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Welcome back to the interview room here at Little Caesars Arena as we continue to preview the 2024 Midwest regional. We're joined by the Tennessee Volunteers from your left to right by Jonas Aidoo, Dalton Knecht, and Jahmai Mashack.

**Q. Can you reflect on your journey from junior college and now you're here. Do you hope you're an inspiration to college players who aren't showered with a lot of offers or who are thinking about transferring up?**

DALTON KNECHT: Yeah, I transferred -- not transferred, but I -- there are some people that are not the highest rated players and stuff like that. It just shows that you go a different route, going JuCo and stuff, and like you said, hitting the transfer portal. I hit that too.

You can make multiple ways to get to one of the best programs in the nation. I think it just shows that you don't have to be the highest rated kid.

**Q. Jahmai, I asked you last week in Charlotte, did it feel different from last year? Can you compare the feeling today compared to where you were last year?**

JAHMAI MASHACK: I've always been a confident player. I feel like everybody on our team last year and this year has always been confident. I wouldn't say the confidence level was different. I would just say probably I think the



fact is like we're healthier. We're healthier. We have people able to play. We have people available. We have more depth.

I just think we're going into it knowing that nothing has to change. We don't have to adjust anything. We don't have to do anything different than what we've been doing all year, which I feel like is important for us as a team. It's just making sure we're all on the same page.

The fact we've gotten this whole year to grow and to come together and to really like learn each other's game and really be comfortable with that, I think it's just going to show as we play more games and as we get to where we are now that it's all going to come together in big moments like this.

**Q. Dalton, to add onto that, if you could go back five years, what would you say?**

DALTON KNECHT: I would just say stay in the gym as much as you can. You'll chase your dream, and everything will happen for a reason. Hard work pays off. That's one thing I'd say. Hard work pays off.

**Q. How would you say you've grown off the court as this season has gone on?**

JONAS AIDOO: I would say from the Europe trip, that's when we truly started to bond off the court. We spent so much time with each other in other countries, learning about each other. I felt like from there on we kept growing from there like to true brothers from there.

DALTON KNECHT: I would say for me, when I first got on campus, all these guys, like Zakai and stuff, we'd all get food and stuff and created that bond early. And when everybody was on campus, we'd play video games or going out and getting food or just staying in the locker room after practice.

JAHMAI MASHACK: I just think the bond of having the tough games that really showed our competitive spirit and I think the tough practices as well. When you have different games like that, it really builds and shows a team's true



character, and it brings your teammates together. I think that's what happened to us throughout the season.

Obviously we started really well. We had a really good season overall. But there were certain games in certain stretches where we were still trying to get to know our teammates and our strengths and our weaknesses.

I think going through those games really helped us trust each other more on and off the court. I feel like we had that bond off the court, on the court is going to be extremely easy.

I think, with that being said, this whole year has just been a journey for everybody. I think we wouldn't take it back for anything. This is why we want to keep continuing to get farther and farther in this tournament, just to justify what we went through through this whole year and that it was worth it.

I think just showing just how those losses and how those close games and how those tough games really build character and really build togetherness.

**Q. Can you talk about what you've seen watching film that has your respect?**

JONAS AIDOO: We know they're a really good offensive team and they like to get up a lot of threes. We like to take pride in being the best defensive team in the nation and locking in on that scouting report.

DALTON KNECHT: Like Jonas said, they're a great offensive team. Also, they make sure they don't foul and get teams to the foul line. That will definitely be something we'll need to watch out for.

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think they both made really great points. Definitely a high offensive team that wants to get a lot of threes, wants to get out and run. Like DK said, they don't want to foul. They want to stay back. They don't want to force a lot of turnovers. They just want to force you into a short shot clock.

I think the thing that's going to give us the edge on the game is what Jonas said, taking pride in our defense. Whether we're hitting shots or not, if our defense is where it's supposed to be, we can create offense in transition, which is where I feel we're the best at is getting out in transition, creating easy layups, getting to the foul line.

I think, as much as they've had their tall center down low, being able to feed Jonas the ball and being able to feed our big guys the ball to try to get them points and maybe get him in foul trouble. But just trying to use everybody on

the court and space the floor out and really just run our offense.

**Q. Jonas, when you kind of study Kalkbrenner, their big guy, on film, what have you seen from some of your matchups this season and from some of the really big guys?**

JONAS AIDOO: I watched him. He's pretty big. He's 7'1", 7'2", 270. I've played pretty much every single big in the nation that's top rated. So I feel like I've prepared for this moment, just to help my team lock in defensively and offensively on the scouting report.

THE MODERATOR: We're wrapping up today's press conference with Tennessee head coach Rick Barnes. Thank you for joining us.

**Q. Coach, just the scout, what are a couple things that jump out at you that are primary focuses when you're getting ready to play Creighton?**

RICK BARNES: Well, there's a number of different things. Obviously, one, transition. They're a really terrific team in transition. Discipline. They really have, I think, a high level basketball IQ. They know each other so well. They know what they're looking for. They know to play within the rhythm of what they do. Just an extremely sound team defensively. They do a great job of helping each other.

I've known Greg for a long time, coaching against him in the Big 12, and just a terrific basketball coach. His team, I think, plays the way he wants them to play.

**Q. Coach McDermott told a story about when he first was deciding to take the job at Creighton, that he called you on the way to the interview. Do you remember that conversation and what you talked about at that time?**

RICK BARNES: One thing I'll tell you about Greg is he's a program builder, and really truly a great offensive mind. After every time we played him, I would take something from what he did to us and add to what we were doing.

I'm sure the conversation would've been, one, everyone would want him in the league because he stands for all the right things. He's done it the way that you'd want any coach to do it. He's a guy that could coach at any level.

Again, when you're in a league that's as competitive as the leagues are that we've played in, you want to know the person you're competing against is doing it the right way. You knew he would do that. You knew he would build a high-level program. I think he did that.

He has done it certainly at Creighton and everywhere he's been. You ask anybody that's in coaching today about him, they would have the utmost respect for him, obviously as a basketball coach, but as a person that represents our business the way you want it. You can't find one better.

**Q. Rick, when you look at Kalkbrenner, the big guy for Creighton, what sort of challenges does he present? What sort of experiences that your guys have had against every elite big man in the country you pretty much have played this season, how much could that help?**

RICK BARNES: Again, he's a terrific rim protector. I think, when they use him on the offensive end where he facilitates, he sees the floor, great feel for his teammates and what he wants to do. I think he does a really good job of finding his space where he wants to be effective.

We've played against players, like you mentioned, but they're all different. He's a tough cover for our post players, and obviously their drop coverage that they use. He's just kind of daring you, what are you going to do here? Forces you into making the right decision.

But he's a person that you've got to give a lot of attention to.

**Q. It seemed like yesterday you were here for the exhibition game against Michigan State. Can you talk about Baylor Scheierman, give us a scouting report? With him and Dalton, are they an example of what could be good about the transfer portal?**

RICK BARNES: Yeah, I don't think there's any question that you give young people an opportunity and they can make the most of it. I think we know there's players -- in this tournament, you see players that play at different levels that can shine when the big lights are on them. I think both of those guys have made just unbelievable impacts on their teams.

Scheierman, when you see him, he's relentless. You can't stop him. He's got a great feel. Again, Greg has done a great job putting all those guys in a position where they have a comfort level about them.

They play a lot of minutes. They don't foul. But he is another guy where, if you just blink for a second, he's going to beat you some way. So you've got to be on edge.

**Q. Rick, you talked about program builders, and I would argue that probably all four of you guys here are program builders, but you're also in the business of**

**results. Whether it's trying to get to the Final Four or win a National Championship, there's always that push/pull. How do you stick to your convictions to kind of build the program when there's also the need to achieve whatever the next thing on the to-do list is?**

RICK BARNES: I think obviously the key is adjustments. When the game changes, you've got to change and make the necessary adjustments. But I do -- we do believe in building through -- we want high school players. Now, if I were at a different level, I might not think that today. I think a year from now when the COVID year is over with, it could sway back a little bit where the older guys aren't here, not as many older guys.

But I think that's been the case throughout our time in basketball is that there's been so many different changes from everything. So I think you have to be able to adapt. The guys that I know that I've been able to grow up in the business with that are still with us and doing it are guys that have had the ability to adapt but not get away from their core philosophy in terms of what they believe.

**Q. Coach, I know the fellas want to win for you. What does it mean to you to see them have success?**

RICK BARNES: Again, I'm fortunate that I've been able to be a part of college basketball for a long time. They get a four or five-year run. It is something that they will look back one day and think that, hey, I had a chance to be a part of that.

It's something that you never, ever take for granted. To get here is hard. It's getting harder and harder every year. And we know that every seed has proven they can win, and it's hard to move on.

I love it for our players. We've got a good group of guys. A year ago they found a way to get to the Sweet 16 without Zakai. As coaches, we do what we do for the players. We appreciate when they do what we ask them to do as well. And when you get a group of guys that have bought into each other and are willing to play for each other, you want to see it last as long as you possibly can.

**Q. Did you all come out okay health-wise from Charlotte? Is Santi good to go?**

RICK BARNES: Yeah, he's just under the weather a little bit, but we expect him to be ready.

**Q. What makes Creighton's kind of drop defense unique, and how do you avoid getting caught in that trap of taking a bunch of mid-range shots?**



RICK BARNES: We don't care about the -- we do what we do. We're not based strictly on analytics. We're going to get our players in position. If they're good mid-range shooters, we want them to take those shots.

What makes them good is because they're solid, they do what they do. They're a team that they don't foul.

Believe me, I don't think there's a team in the country that teaches to foul. We don't want to foul either. We want to play a little bit different than they do, but yet we're not trying to foul, I can tell you that. They're a good shooting team, a free-throw shooting team.

There's so many different ways you can play defense, just like there's so many different ways you can play offense. They've got their style that's gotten them here, we have, and you can pretty much expect both teams are going to do what they do that's gotten them this far.

**Q. Rick, you hear the term "players' coach" today, just the idea of coaches having a stronger relationship with their players. How have you evolved as a coach in terms of how you relate to your guys throughout your career?**

RICK BARNES: One, I've always known it's about them. There's times in the past I didn't do a great job. I've said many times I've gone back and apologized to players that I didn't think I did my job with them.

I think, if you ask our players today, it would bother me if they didn't tell you I was the most consistent guy on the floor every day. I'm going to do my job, but when it's over with, I'm going to -- we're two people, and I'm going to respect them for that. But I hope they respect the job as a coaching staff we have to do.

Again, I think the best thing a coach can do is consistency every day. Whatever it is you're demanding with your details, you've got to stay with that. When it's over with, you want them to know, hey, if you've been on them hard, there's a reason behind it.

But I don't want them to ever not look forward to coming back to practice, not looking forward to coming back to their individual workouts, whatever it may be.

It goes back, and it's not just me, it's our staff. We're constantly talking, our staff. We have a great feel for our team. When you're around people as much as we're around each other, you can read body language. You can read where guys are. And the question to me is transparency. You've got to confront it head on. You can't just think it's going to go away if there is a problem.

A lot of it goes back to our staff. I just have a great group of guys around me that are as fully invested as you could possibly be.

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