

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

Friday, March 29, 2024

Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

**Tennessee Volunteers**

**Rick Barnes**

**Zakai Zeigler**

**Jahmai Mashack**

**Josiah-Jordan James**

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Tennessee - 82, Creighton - 75

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the Tennessee Volunteers, 82-75 winners over the Creighton Blue Jays this evening to advance to the Midwest final against Purdue on Sunday.

From your left to your right, we are joined by head coach Rick Barnes, Zakai Zeigler, Jahmai Mashack, and Josiah-Jordan James.

RICK BARNES: I really thought both teams played their hearts out, played really hard is what you would expect obviously this time of year. The stuff that Coach McDermott does with his team, they're an extremely, extremely hard team to guard.

Really proud of the effort defensively. Again, they do a lot of things that are really difficult. Also, we made a run, and this time of year you expect them to make a run, which they did. But really proud of the way our guys stayed with each other, did what we had to do.

Great win for our program. These guys up here, I just thought they were terrific with a mindset coming in and continuing with it throughout the game.

**Q. Josiah, just as a senior, a guy who's been around here for so long, what's the personal significance for you being part of a team going to the Elite Eight for the**



**second time in school history?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: It's a blessing just to be here. We've put in so much work, for me for five years, and every guy up here since they've been here. They're great leaders. This is the best group I've ever been around.

Just to have this moment with these guys making history. We're not done yet, we know that. We're so happy to be one step closer to our end goal. It's amazing to see all our hard work finally pay off.

**Q. Coach Barnes, over the last few decades, you've coached some incredibly talented teams. Off the court there's qualities that help a team make the run to the Elite Eight, like this team. What about the character of this team on and off the court make them so great?**

RICK BARNES: If you were with us every day, I think you'd understand why I love coaching so much because what you see these guys do tonight, I watch them do it every day.

They would tell you that, we do, we go at it probably sometimes too hard. They've embraced it. Each one of these guys in their own way has brought something to our program when we recruited them.

It's their effort. Again, they demand it from each other. Only the days when they're a little tired, maybe I get on them, but otherwise they do a pretty good job pushing themselves and coaching themselves, knowing what it takes to win at this level.

**Q. Josiah, how big was what Jahmai gave you in all facets of the game without Santi?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Jahmai is huge. He's the cornerstone of this team. The effort he brings to the floor, it doesn't show up in the stat sheet all the time, but we know, the guys in the locker room know what he brings, not many in the country could do. These two are the best defenders in the country for sure. They can guard 1 through 5. Two of the toughest guys I've ever been around.



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What Jahmai brings, it's hard to put into words, and it doesn't show up every night in the stat sheet. It's something he's done his whole life, and it's gotten him to this point right now.

**Q. Jahmai, when did you find out that you were going to be inserted into the starting lineup? Then to get this win for Santi and to give him a chance to play on Sunday, what does that do for you guys, and how important was that?**

JAHMAI MASHACK: I didn't know until I think probably shootaround earlier today. I kind of had a feeling, but I just wasn't sure.

I've been raised to prosper in tough situations, and when my name is called to rise up to that occasion. I wouldn't be doing my job right now as a Christian if I didn't thank God for everything that He's done for me individually and with this team.

Ever since last year, I've been fighting to try to get past the Sweet 16, not just for me, but for my teammates, for Coach Barnes, just to see how much he puts into the team, and he doesn't want the publicity for it. That's something that I just love about our program, about my coach and my teammates.

God has gotten me here. God has given me the ability to just go into any situation and try to make the best out of it. My whole goal on this team is to impact winning. If that means I've got to start, I haven't started in a minute, but if that means I've got to start and come in and do what I've got to do, that's what I'm going to do.

I'm hurting. My back hurts. I'm tired. But it's anything to win, man. It's anything to win. I just love this team, and I love how much we fought and how much we came together in times of adversity through that game. It just shows how much our character is going into play in this tournament.

**Q. Zakai, what was the plan of attack for the mid-range on offense tonight?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: We knew Trey Alexander going into the game is a very good mid-range shooter. Good players, they're going to get the ball and get to their spots, but we've got to do whatever we do to stop them from making the shot really.

I feel like we went into the game with the right game plan, and everybody was locked in.

**Q. Josiah, the second half you guys just hit them with defense, rebounding, kind of staples of what you guys have been about. Can you kind of walk through that effort you put in to take control of the game?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: You don't rise to the occasion, you fall to the level of your preparation. That's something, if you come to watch us, 365 days of the year, those are the staples of our team, something we do each and every day.

So on the biggest stage of college basketball, we're going to fall back to our habits, and those are our habits. Defensive rebounding is something you can take, whether you're making shots, playing well on offense, being able to rebound the ball and guard people is instrumental, especially in a tournament like this when shots may not be falling. Just having those as our backbone is huge.

**Q. For any of the players, can you reflect on your logo-to-rim defense that just really made the difference?**

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think that's just what we do. It's what we do. I think it separates us as a team because guys think that early pressure is going to happen. It just happens with basketball. But to sustain that for as long as we do, it wears on teams. That wears on teams, trust me.

When you have a guy like Zakai pressuring the ball and trying to get at it, and you've got to worry about him stealing the ball, him tipping passes, it's hard to run your offense. It's hard to get into your offense. That is something that can't be replaced or -- you know, it's something that we need on the court.

It's great that we pressure the ball and that we're able to do that, but for as long as we do it, that's what separates us from every other team, we sustain it.

**Q. Zakai, for you, you've been through so much adversity off the court to get to where you are today. You play with so much heart. If you could reflect on the journey that it's taken to get to where you are right now, what can you say about that? If you could even go back and tell yourself, when you were going through adversity, one thing, what would you say?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I would just say as of right now, I would just say God is great. He's given me these opportunities, and I've just taken as much advantage as I can of them.

Me and Coach G, we had a long talk when I was going through the rehab process, and he was just saying there's going to be dark days, there's going to be ups and downs.



I've just got to keep my head down and work. I felt throughout that whole time I kept doing that, and I'm just thankful to be in the position I'm in today.

**Q. If you can just speak to the way that 18-0 run shaped the outcome of the game. Because you guys were at that point able to give yourselves some cushion and able to absorb their comeback.**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: We just kept telling ourselves just to be relentless. We were saying that before the game, just keep being relentless. We understand that basketball is a game of runs, going to be ups, going to be downs.

We went on our run, but going back to the huddle we just kept telling ourselves, hey, we've got to stay within the game. Get back on defense and do what we do. I felt like we did exactly that.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. You can head back to the locker room.

We'll continue here with Coach Barnes.

**Q. That was a great game win. What do you tell the players to turn the page quickly so you can face a really tough Purdue team in a really tough environment?**

RICK BARNES: I wanted them to enjoy this one. I thought it was really an all around team win. We had two freshmen that we started telling today spend extra time in the film room. You're going to play at some point in time.

I thought Freddie had a great assist and got a three. Cam went in and got a possession for us and knocked down a three. I thought those were huge plays.

We played Purdue earlier in the year. It was a loaded field in Maui, Honolulu. Hard-fought game, it really was. We'll get back at it with them.

I thought we were playing Friday, Sunday, right? It's already Saturday, and we're really playing Saturday, Sunday. The fact is I just heard we got the early game.

Right now it's a mental prep, and we know that. Again, we obviously have great respect for Purdue, and we've played them. But they're much better, and I'd like to think we are too.

**Q. Tobe didn't have a big stat line, but how important was he for you guys tonight, especially in the second half?**

RICK BARNES: I thought Tobe and Jahmai, even -- I guarantee when I watch the tape, some of those tip-out rebounds Josiah got his hand on it. But those extra possessions are huge, especially there at the end.

Big three-point play. We went to an empty ball screen on the side. Z made the right read. That was a big play for us. It was his effort getting on the glass.

I thought, again, both Shack and, when we switched off a few times on the big fella, they did a good job holding their ground there. Again, Tobe has gotten better and better and better. If you really think about it, he and Zakai come out of the same AAU program. Neither one of them were highly recruited, but they both play with a lot of heart. We're just blessed and fortunate to have them.

**Q. You hear Jahmai say that we've been working all year to get past the Sweet 16, and having not been past this point with Tennessee yet, do you take a moment to sit and enjoy this and see what this team is capable of?**

RICK BARNES: I'm not sure I'll be able to do it until we're finished. A year ago we felt we had a really good team, a team that could do some damage. I'm as proud of that team a year ago because, when Zakai went down, we had to totally remake ourselves.

I'm not sure Shack has started since -- he was our starting point guard once Zakai went down. We got to the Sweet 16, and from the time they came back, they've talked about it that they wanted to get better, wanted to go further.

They're a close knit group of guys. I really felt like in the last -- after the SEC Tournament, they've done just an incredible job of getting after each other and holding each other to a higher level, higher standard. I do my -- I think I do my job getting after them, but it's a whole lot easier when they start getting at each other.

It happened the other night in the game. Where Dalton was struggling a little bit, and they snapped at him to snap him out of it a bit, and they talked to him. When you get teams that care that much and can take coaching from each other, that's a good thing. I can tell you, that's where the loss in the SEC Tournament helped us.

**Q. Dalton at the beginning of the that second half, he had like six points, four assists. Creighton called two timeouts. Can you reflect on his play in particular during that stretch?**

RICK BARNES: Again, I thought tonight he did more. He was trying to rebound the ball. I thought he really got back

to -- I thought he was really engaged defensively. Not just thinking I've got to score, score, score. When he gets that look and he's going with it -- I actually told him, when you're in a ball screen, they're coming, you're going to have to let Z have some shots at it, and Z made a couple of them.

But he's highly competitive. When he gets out -- our defense broke that game open early for us. We got deflections and got out and ran.

You look at them, and they're such an excellent position basketball team defensively. They don't foul, as much as I was asking them to be called. They do a great job at poking at the ball.

But during that stretch, he got it going. Obviously our guys have seen it when they do that, they're going to try to play to him.

**Q. You mentioned that three-point play near the end of the game, just under two minutes left. You guys didn't seem to have any fear of Kalkbrenner and his size. Is that something that was part of the game plan to go right after him? You blocked him a couple times on the defensive end. I know it's obviously early, but do you think that will carry over to the Purdue matchup with Edey?**

RICK BARNES: Every team is different, and it will be a different something, again, once we go back and start digging into it.

We worked really hard on drop coverage, where they drop it, because we knew we were going to get shots, and we had to decide, did we want to pull up behind and shoot the three? Did we want to get inside? All I ask them to do, if you're open behind a screen, we expected those two guys to shoot it, Zakai and Dalton.

If not, I said get inside the 15-foot area to engage them, and from there you've got to make the right decision, whether it's a floater or whatever it is, you've got to shoot it with confidence. Then Tobe got a couple where we said the post guy's got to get to the rim.

Then defensively, we weren't going to double-team him. I thought they were really well prepared at the start of the game. We wanted to try to get after them. Very first play of the game, and we had talked about doubling the ball, and they came off us, boom, boom, boom, and they were so good at it. We're not going to be able to do that.

We adjusted to it, and they're so hard to guard because Greg is such a great basketball coach, and he puts them in position. We also wanted pace. We wanted a high-tempo

game we felt, because they had been playing a lot of guys 40 minutes, and we did, we wanted to try to early get up and down the floor and get it into a high-possession game.

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