

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Final - Tennessee vs Purdue

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

Tennessee Volunteers

Rick Barnes

Dalton Knecht

Zakai Zeigler

Josiah-Jordan James

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

Purdue - 72, Tennessee - 66

THE MODERATOR: Good evening. Welcome back to the interview room here. We're joined by the Tennessee Volunteers.

From your left to right, we're joined by head coach Rick Barnes, Dalton Knecht, Zakai Zeigler and Josiah-Jordan James.

RICK BARNES: Congratulations to Purdue. Both teams fought hard. I thought our guys really put up a battle. We were playing against a guy that has a unique game certainly.

I think Matt Painter has done a great job with continuing to build this team and grow them in areas to give them a chance now to be part of the Final Four and play for a National Championship.

Not just what he does when he posts up, the way he really gets your defense distorted and everything, but the way their team knows how to get it to him, different angles, different times.

Again, just congratulations to them. I can't tell you how much and how special this team was for us as a coaching staff to coach. The tough part is when you know where we started five years ago with Josiah-Jordan and Santiago with a class behind them to where we are today. I think when people think of college basketball, they know that Tennessee is going to be in the fight.



The hardest thing is when it ends and we have a special year with a special guy like Dalton coming into the program. Certainly I've said no one's changed our program more than Zakai Zeigler. His DNA has changed everything. That's the tough part of where we are right now. Just a blessing of having a chance to be with a group of guys. They set out to win a National Championship, play on Monday.

I can tell you this, when they look back on it, right now it's very difficult, but they'll look back and know they went after it and have no regrets.

Again, I wish I could change the outcome for them, but the fact that God has blessed me with the time I've had with these guys, it's something I wish every coach can enjoy.

Q. Josiah, can you just, and I know it's probably too quick, but emotionally can you just kind of sum up where you are after everything you guys have been through this year.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: It's hard to put into words, like the pain that I feel right now, but it's even harder to put into words like the joy and the happiness I've gotten from being around this team, this university for the past five years. These guys mean so much to me.

I can't really describe it, but I love them. I love them so much.

Q. Dalton, you had back-to-back threes to make them take a timeout, and after then they started guarding you a little tighter off the screen. What adjustments do you have to make to your game in order to get yourself open when that happens?

DALTON KNECHT: Just watch the film with Coach and see where I can improve my game for the future and stuff like that. They made their adjustments. I got to make my adjustments and just learn off of it.

Q. Question for Dalton. When you look back at this, and I know it's tough to do in the moment after, but



can you feel good knowing that you went down swinging and you gave it your all and put your team on your back and got you as close as you did to where you got?

DALTON KNECHT: I don't think I put the team on my back. I think all of us carried each other. I think every single one of us did what we needed to do.

At the end of the day, they were just the better team, and we didn't -- we always were coming out swinging.

Yeah, I just love these guys, and I wish we could have one more game. I'm thankful for all these guys for accepting me for my one year here, as well as the coaching staff.

Q. Zakai, can you share your thoughts on the game Dalton had and maybe on surrounding cast not playing as well as it has in many games this season.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: DK, he's a fighter. Every night he's going to do what he did tonight. We think he's the best player in the country. That will always be how I see him in my eyes, best player in the country.

Purdue, they did their thing. They won the game. Hopefully they'll go out and win the next game also. We just didn't execute some stuff, and Coach always told us it comes down to little things.

We fought. Every guy in that locker room, we wanted to win. I don't feel like anybody in there had any doubt in their mind that we could still win the game or had any doubt in their mind that going into the game that we wouldn't win.

I know everybody in there fought and did whatever they had to do and left it all out there on the floor. Just got to give it to Purdue. They did what they had to do, and they won the game.

Q. Dalton, obviously not the result you would want, but the game that yourself and Zach Edey had, just the back and forth battle, it seemed like every time Zach hit a basket, you kind of answered. What's it like to be in a game featuring two great players such as yourself and Zach?

DALTON KNECHT: Yeah, we were going back and forth, but I think it's -- for me, it's my teammates for having the belief in me to go out there and keep shooting it and keep running plays for me and stuff like that and just having the trust to have the ball in my hands.

I think it's just credit to my teammates for making it super easy just for me to go out there and be myself.

Q. Josiah, it's always difficult when you get to this point in the season, but has this season felt different to you, and does this feel different now? As Coach said, you left it all out there, no regrets?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Yeah, I'm obviously proud of everything we were able to accomplish. This group in my five years of being here was the most fun to be around. We genuinely loved each other so much, and that's the hardest part sitting here right now. Just not being able to go to practice tomorrow and knowing that the season is really over.

But the relationships that we have are lifelong relationships. I just hated that our season had to end so early.

Q. Dalton, just what's your relationship been like with Coach Barnes this year, and how beneficial has that been for you?

DALTON KNECHT: I would say it's by far the closest I've ever had to be with a coach. He's coached me super hard ever since I told him on my visit that I wanted to be coached super hard, and he's held up to his hand.

He's been beyond just that. He's been helping me off the court, on the court. He cracks jokes and stuff like that. Coach Barnes, I love him to death, and I can't thank him enough for bringing me in for my one year here.

Q. Coach, just what about the way the game was officiated, how difficult was it to -- I guess to coach your guys on how to try to defend Edey with the way the game was called?

RICK BARNES: One, you've got a very unique player in Zach Edey, very unique. It's a hard game to officiate.

Space on the court is so important, and depending on how a guy gets there and you try to keep him from getting there and the effort that goes into that oftentimes can get one guy in particular there out of position to where he can maybe help on some other different things.

He's an extremely physical player, does a great job wedging with his body. I thought all along his misses are the hardest thing to defend because he does lead strong. He'll bounce you off and try to create a crack and step through it. That's where he's improved so much with his footwork.

I think it's hard for officials because there's not many guys like that. The game has changed so much through the

years. Whether you stay in the lane three seconds or you don't, if you don't ever get out, it really distorts everything. I'm not saying he did or he didn't, but watching tape, he's a difficult guy to officiate, I can tell you that.

He's an extremely difficult guy to guard because, again, knowing where he wants the ball. And he's got a group of guys around it that know how to get it to him at the right time. As much as you try to scheme to get guys down there to try to take some space away, all you can do is go down and dig at it and try to help -- hope you can come up with some deflections.

We fouled -- I haven't even really looked at the stats. It's hard. I can tell you, he's a difficult guy to guard against, but he's a difficult guy for referees to officiate too. I don't care what anybody says. He's a hard guy to do that with because he's a unique guy in terms of how he plays.

Q. I know it's not the way you want the season to end, but how proud are you of the guys, the way they fought all game, coming back and forth. They had multiple chances to turn the outcome out and how they fought all year.

RICK BARNES: We've had a group of guys that have done that. It goes back -- like I said, I'm just thankful that God brought these guys into my life because I truly have enjoyed going to practice with them every day. Even days when they weren't at their best and I'd get after them a little bit, they responded.

I go back to where we were five years ago and what Josiah and Santi did and where they started, where we are today, they left it so much better than they found it. Zakai certainly has made an unbelievable impact.

But Dalton coming in and having just a year that will be hard -- I mean, think about it, just out of nowhere. Nobody expected it.

This group of guys, if you knew their families, if you knew their backgrounds -- and Jahmai Mashack, he's been a big part of it. Jonas had a tough day today, and nobody hurts more than he does.

We've got a special group of guys, and I just -- again, when you have a special team, that's what makes it so hard when it ends because you just want so much more for them.

Q. There's some buzz on Twitter with how Dalton Knecht has raised his draft stock pretty dramatically over the past month or so. If there was an NBA team interested in taking him, what would you say to them?

RICK BARNES: Well, he's only getting started. He's just getting started. He came -- I mean, offensively he's going to continue to get better there. He's what I would call a flame thrower. He gets his shot off, you're not going to affect him with it.

Defensively he knows he's got to get better there, but I think he would tell you that no one's asking to maybe do it as hard as we did this year, and he responded well.

When we have some guys that maybe aren't having the days that you want them to have and more falls on him offensively, I'm really impressed with his cardio toughness and the way that he tries to fight through. And people trying to make him guard, which people are going to do that too, screening him, doing all kind of things.

He's a young, 22-year-old kid that's really just getting started. He loves the game. He works at it. It's going to be fun going forward to watch how much he improves.

Q. Coach, 31 shots for Dalton tonight. How would you assess the balance for your team offensively and the game kind of turning into a mano y mano at times between Dalton and Zach?

RICK BARNES: Again, I go back, we know our players. We know how to read them. When he gets it going, like Zakai said, we've seen him do that, would I like to have more at the rim at times to try to put more pressure? Absolutely. But we weren't getting that early. When we struggle like that, we're fortunate we have a guy that can go do what he can do.

We were trying to move some things around, do some different things with him, and they were obviously working hard trying to keep him from getting it.

We go into games looking for balance, but if guys aren't getting it done, we have a guy we can rely on. Do you want to do that? We really don't. But when he gets it going, we want him to do what he does, and our players understand that. They worked hard at that.

Again, would you like to have more balance from inside, more from the post guys? Absolutely.

Q. Dalton had a couple threes late in the game, three minutes left, two minutes left. Was it something Purdue did, or did they just not fall?

RICK BARNES: The ones he missed?

Q. Yes.

RICK BARNES: I can assure you, they're not going to affect him on his threes. I haven't seen anybody really all year affect him too much when he's out there. If anything, it was the fact that a lot seemed to be put on him because, again, we weren't getting the balance that we'd like to have.

He had some looks, and they just didn't go down for him. They're a really good defensive rebounding team and a good offense. They know when Edey's going to shoot it, and they start wedging in there.

But Dalton offensively could do a lot of different things, especially with so much attention put on him. He's not afraid of the moment. That's the one thing that I think I probably learned after our very first game against Michigan State, exhibition. He surprised us all. What we realized then is he wasn't afraid of the moment.

Q. I think you all have lost to Purdue twice this season by a total of 10 points. They shot 81 free throws and you all have shot 41 in those games. How difficult is it to beat a team when those numbers are what they are, however they get there?

RICK BARNES: It's hard. I can go back, and we can all have what we feel about it. I've been doing this a long time. I was talking earlier about it. There's different ways you can foul in this game. There's different ways you can get fouled.

I've always felt that through the years -- we lost an NCAA game years ago where we were playing against a team where every touch foul on the perimeter was being called but the physicality inside wasn't. My question during that game was are we going to call it different inside-outside?

It's kind of changed a little bit and kind of gone the other way. Some of the contact allowed on the perimeter is more so than it used to be, and the inside pretty much -- it's physical. It is. Somebody said it the other day, and it's true. Our game is more physical than the NBA. It's not even close with the physicality that's in our game today.

I don't have a problem with it. People would always say that we're real physical, but there's a fine line there that goes with it. But when you look at it and see -- I said it before coming in that I thought the game there was officiated different, and it was there. Some of the perimeter touch fouls in Maui weren't called today, and I don't think they should have been. I don't think they should have been called in Maui.

But there's a difference in officiating from the start of the

year to the end of the year. We know it. Everybody knows it. I was on the rules committee for five years. We talked about it.

Again, both teams played their hearts out. Again, I'm not complaining about the officials because you just asked me a question, and I think it's a very hard game to officiate. Sometimes it's hard for players to adjust to exactly what's going on because it's a tough game to officiate, especially when you have a unique player like Zach. A guy like Dalton on the perimeter, he was getting pushed around a little bit too.

That's where, again, I think it's -- officials, believe me, it's a hard game to officiate. As much time as I spent on the rules committee and know how hard they work at wanting to get the game right. Again, they would all say this time of year they want players to decide the game, which they should, but there's certain rules that always have to be administered whether or not we like it or not.

Q. Rick, you mentioned Jonas. What did you get from JP during that stretch? Did that come down to a little bit more physicality and him trying to fight Zach for position inside?

RICK BARNES: I think that's the one great takeaway from today for him. He got a chance to play more than he's played -- I'm sitting here thinking now maybe we ought to try to use him like Zach Edey because he showed his physicality. We thought that about him. I don't think he's ever seen himself as that kind of player because you watch him warm up, he wants to stand out and shoot threes.

But the fact is he went in there and battled against Player of the Year in college basketball. It's a great experience. I think going forward he definitely understands what it's about. Again, Jonas was having a hard time letting Zach set up right in front of the rim, and we couldn't get there to help. Just couldn't get there when it's that deep.

The whole thing was trying to get him to start out further, trying to keep him there, so we could get those digs where we didn't have to come so far. Jonas was having a hard time keeping him out of the middle of the lane.

Q. What went wrong in the final five minutes of the first half?

RICK BARNES: You know what, I'm not sure anything went wrong. You're playing two teams, it's got a game of runs. We had one, they made one. Again, I thought we had a couple shots that weren't good. It wasn't because of lack of effort. But they're a terrific basketball team. When you lose to a Purdue or a Tennessee, I'm not sure you can

say anything particularly went wrong.

I know every guy out there wanted to win. There's going to be a winner, there's going to be a loser. We'll look back, and we'll say we could have done this, could have done that, but we didn't. We fought.

I told the team at halftime I didn't think we'd played our best basketball yet, but there we gave them those downhill drives where they had a couple -- I think they had 6, 8 points where they pretty much came in untouched from the perimeter. That's not what we normally do.

Give them credit, they read it and finished it.

Q. You've obviously had some good teams. What's made this group different, do you think? For you, does this moment feel different having gotten what you got out of these guys to get to this point before it ended?

RICK BARNES: I think what made this group special is character. If you knew their families, if you knew who they were and who they are and you think about -- I give my staff great credit in terms of the intel that they do when they bring people into our program.

I've often walked into a gym and sat down with a guy and watching the person they want me to watch, and I'll see somebody else play, and the coach will say, Coach, he wouldn't be a good fit for us. Our coaches know what we're looking for, the fit we want. These guys have represented that to the highest degree.

As a coach, you look forward to practice, and you want guys -- Dalton talked about being coached -- that want to be coached. And when you have something that you know is something and when it comes to an end like that, really as tough as it is, we'll sit back, or I certainly have all year, realized how blessed I've been to have this group of guys, and it started with, as I mentioned earlier, with Josiah and Santi.

It's just Jahmai Mashack and Z, if you all knew these guys the way we do and how much they care, it's -- I've been able to do it for a long time, and maybe next year we'll have another team, but those seniors don't get another crack at it. That's why I'm glad we accomplished -- and I'll tell you, there's no doubt in my mind that we thought we had a team that could win the National Championship, and I still believe that.

But we ran up against a team that's going to get ready to have a chance to play on Monday. They'll have to win another one to get there, but they're certainly -- you have to admire the fact they lost to, what, a 16 seed, and turned

right back around. That's what college sports is about is the character of these kids. Make no bones about it, they're kids, and our job is to teach them.

Like I said, I just wish more people, more coaches, and every coach talks about their team what a special group we had. I wish more coaches had a chance to have guys like this. And I'm not saying that others don't, but it's just we have a special group of guys, and I hate it for them today that maybe we weren't at our very best. But I do know we fought the entire time.

Q. Just taking the officiating whistles completely out of the equation, how proud of your guys on the interior were you the way they battled with Zach and battled for the glass? I know you came up short on the glass, but obviously it was a tough matchup all the way around.

RICK BARNES: I really am proud of it. Again, I'm not blaming anything on the officials, I'm not. I don't want you to think or anybody to think that because I wouldn't ever do that until I've watched the tape myself and saw what I wanted to see.

I'm proud because we knew, we had already played them, and we knew what to expect. I was a little surprised at the start of the game that they didn't run. Down out in Hawaii, it was an up-and-down game, and I think they felt like Matt wanted to go through him all day.

You look at his three-point shots, we were obviously aware of the supporting cast, they made a big one when they needed to. There was a big three they made in the last couple of minutes. Once the game settled in, we knew. It was very simple. They were going to come down and pound it in there.

I knew our guys would fight. I think Jonas fought as hard as he could. I really do. I think that Tobe fought his heart out and JP, even Jahmai Mashack, when he was down there that one time. Like I said, he's a unique guy.

I really am proud of the effort. We still had a chance all throughout. The big play was the block too. Edey made a great block. If we had gotten two there, it would have been a one-possession game. That was a great play. You've got to give him credit. He stayed with it.

Again, I wouldn't trade our guys for anybody.

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