

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Tennessee vs Iowa State

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United Center

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes

Amari Evans

J.P. Estrella

Ja'Kobi Gillespie

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

RICK BARNES: Excited to be here. Just an incredible amount of respect for T.J. and his program and what he's done in his time back at Iowa State. An extremely skilled offensive team. Defensively there aren't many flaws there. That's why they've had the year they've had. They've had a program so sound fundamentally. They do so many good things.

We know that it's a tremendous challenge in front of us.

Q. I think you're the one coach who's not going to get asked about the Carolina opening --

RICK BARNES: I'm from North Carolina.

Q. There's a little history there, but Clemson, Texas, Tennessee, these are schools with strong football traditions that you spent a good chunk of your career at. Is there a trick to being a basketball coach, or thriving as a basketball coach at a so-called football school?

RICK BARNES: You can be successful anywhere if you've got a great AD that understands that the climate today is different than what it was years ago. The obvious problem today is there's some fan bases that still think they have an entitlement and they think it's going to be the same way. The game has changed totally because of NIL.

I know Hubert, he was the very first player I started recruiting as a head coach, back at George Mason.



Incredible coach. I don't care where he would be; everything that's good about the game, he is about it.

I've got coaches on my staff that are so ready to be head coaches, and I tell every one of them, the biggest thing you have to analyze is their athletic director, where they're coming from, do they really understand where we are today in this basketball game. Because it's much different. If they don't, I'm not sure that it's a good job.

Q. Coach, with Ja'Kobi and Nate leading you guys in scoring, how have you seen the relationship grow throughout the season and the tournament and how has Ja'Kobi's leadership helped things grow?

RICK BARNES: Well, they're similar in the fact they both love the game of basketball. Both of them are incredible, humble young men. They're very unselfish. You can't meet either one of them without liking them. On the court, the time that they spent together with a target being on their backs every night, I think they've learned how to handle that together.

But they both have been terrific for us. Certainly made a major impact, not just on the court, but off the court, maybe in more ways than people can even imagine, and the locker room, because they have never, ever made it about them, ever. It's not about them. They want this team to be up front and foremost. When you've got two guys that think like that, it's easy for everybody else to fall in behind them.

Q. Last year this weekend you said goodbye to Zakai Zeigler, great career, and there was questions of what came next at that position. Can you speak to what Ja'Kobi has come in, to not just answer that question, but really leave his own legacy in one season for you?

RICK BARNES: He has done that. We knew that Ja'Kobi was special, but we did not know how special until a couple weeks of summer practices. He started showing us -- I guess the best word I can use is wow factor, some things that we didn't know that he could or would do.

Defensively he became a guy that once he learned our scheme, what we were trying to do, he embraced that. But offensively days in practice where he would get going, he

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just showed us some things that we didn't know he had.

He's played more minutes than we thought. He became the guy kind of like Zakai, sometimes I think a guy that's tired is better than some guys that are fresh. In that conversation with him throughout the game -- because the coaches are doing their job by telling me, we need to get Ja'Kobi out, get him out -- I look at him and say how you doing, if he gives me the thumbs up I say, he's good.

We were there with Zakai like that. Ja'Kobi like Zakai, high level competitor, really wants to win. Both of them unbelievable teammates, and that's why they're able to lead.

Q. To go back to what you said a minute ago about what makes a good job or athletic director who understands. Obviously it costs a lot of money now to put a good team together like the one you have. Do you ever feel like you're fighting with football for resources? As the price goes up, do you think that's going to be an issue in departments like yours that want to win at everything?

RICK BARNES: Well, no, I think football is the biggest asset that we have. Think about it, Texas, Tennessee, Clemson, assistant coach at Alabama, assistant coach at Ohio State. There is no doubt football is the engine that drives the train for all of us.

By what they do, it allows all of us to be able to do what we do. I've always embraced that. What I've learned in this business -- my job is important to me. I promise you Josh Heupel's job is important to them. Karen Weekly, our softball coach. Every sport matters.

We've got a situation now certainly at Tennessee with Danny White and his staff and Randy Boyd, Donde Plowman, they want to give us all a chance to compete at the highest level. It goes back again -- talking about jobs, if the administration is not lined up with the athletic department, it's going to fail. It's going to fail somewhere along the line.

I watched it fail at a couple different places because of that. You have to have an athletic director that knows all that.

I don't know how anybody could ever be jealous of football because it means so much to us in terms of our fall visits. Of all the places I've been, Tennessee is the most electric place I've ever been, where there's a fan base, you just feel it the whole week during the fall. Everybody looks forward to it.

I found out early that football, it is what it is. Like Josh, he's

to me one of the best football coaches in the country. We spend time together starting here in a couple weeks or so with the orange caravan, those type things. And we all have tough jobs. He's got a really tough one. He's got a really tough one. And the football coaches at this level, I think with him going to a playoff, it makes those jobs even tougher.

But it goes back to we've got an athletic director that really understands what we're in, what we're doing, and I know I don't want to let him down. And I know all the other coaches don't either, because he's got the hardest job, by the way. Danny White has got the hardest job in the athletic department.

But he's getting it done at a high level.

Q. There's a handful of veteran coaches in the Sweet 16. What does it say about the importance of continually adapting in this landscape and how have you approached that over the years?

RICK BARNES: Well, obviously I know most of them, certainly through the years. It's guys that they coach and play basketball the way they think it should be played, and they've stuck with it. I think we've all changed in some way through the years, but there's core values, principles that we live by in our program. And I look at the coaches -- you're talking about it, it's not just a winning team, it's a winning program, and there's a difference.

Again, we've seen that you can spend a lot of money and get players that maybe that doesn't translate. It goes more than just -- you need money; we know that. But there's a lot more to it than that. And I think older coaches, and certainly the guys that I know that you're referring to, those guys I could almost tell you, you put them anywhere in the country at any school, if they get the right support, they would be winning because they believe in what they're doing.

Q. How would you describe this Iowa State defense as somebody who's never seen them before?

RICK BARNES: It's a tough one. I mean, all you've got to do is look at the analytics and look at all that. Just so well-coached. Understand what they're trying to get done as a group. They have really great rotations, great use of hands, everything that you would want a defensive team to do, they show that.

Obviously ball security is so important against them or they really make you pay with it. But they're not going to give you anything easy, not anything easy whatsoever.



Q. Coach, Joshua Jefferson obviously is such a great player; how does the game change with or without him on the floor, and how do you prepare with the uncertainty of not knowing whether he'll play?

RICK BARNES: Well, we'll certainly always prepare for him. He's a great basketball player. He can give it to you anyway that he wants to do it. He is terrific. He's got a demeanor about him.

I don't know him, but I've watched him on tape. He's one of those guys, I would say he has that it factor in every facet of the game in how he does things.

Q. Following up on the question about some of the other coaches who have been around a while, Tom Izzo said today when asked about coming back, he said he was coming, quote, because I'm stubborn and dumb, but I'm not ready to give into the system even though I think the system is completely broken. Just wondering how you view this. Are you staying in this despite what's going on, or do you feel like you are in good command of things and not having to fight that?

RICK BARNES: Well, he's right. We know it's broken. We know that.

We've always had to adjust and adapt. I always kid around, the NIL now stands for now it's legal.

But back in the day when I first got into this, I think my first year, there were no recruiting periods. If you wanted to go out and recruit every day of the year, you could. You could call anybody, do whatever you wanted to do. Then they started putting in days where you had to -- it made some people actually work.

Then all the different phone things, just silly stuff. I just know there's so many people that I was around saw this coming, but it never got fixed.

I remember Tony Bennett said one of the smartest things I've ever heard before he stepped out of this when all this came about. Tony said what we should do right now is give every player on the team \$250,000 and you know what, they'd have been happy. But then nobody wanted to take the initiative to fix it.

But I love coaching basketball. I think I'm so blessed to have the opportunity that God has given me at Tennessee, and I said it -- I'm not saying it -- I know I've got the best coaching situation in the country because of our administration. I've never seen one aligned like it.

Without that today, you have no chance. What I mean by

that, we have an unbelievable fan base, unbelievable. But our fan base, which I think is the best in the country, they have no idea what Danny White is up against every day trying to do what he's got to do to get us done.

I know that he loves our fan base. No one is more game oriented, game experienced than he and his staff. But if you don't have the administration, the athletic department lined up, it's not going to work. It's not going to work.

I think even the power leagues now, there's going to be a couple tier leagues. There's going to be some teams that are going to spend \$5 million and another one is going to spend whatever they have to spend. Where that goes, I don't know, other than what Tom said. It's broken, but I just -- again, I love coaching, and if I didn't have the leadership -- I don't know. I'm sure Tom is happy with what he's got going there because if you've got to fight the game plus administrations, it doesn't work. It doesn't work.

Q. You mentioned you love coaching. You've obviously accomplished pretty much everything but getting to a Final Four at Tennessee. I'm curious what your driving force is at this point in your career when you've done just about everything.

RICK BARNES: You know, I was at Alabama for a year with Coach Sanderson. In our first game I walked in and he was literally lying on the sofa in his office and he had hands over like this. I said, Coach, are you okay? He said, this would be a great job if you never had to play games.

I love practice. I could practice seven days a week, four hours a day. I love it. I just love watching guys get better, put it all together.

But really, I love it. I just like doing that. I kind of got --

Q. Getting to this weekend, for instance, is that a driving force --

RICK BARNES: Look, we all start wanting to win a National Championship. We know there's only one team standing. We know that on Monday night. First of all, we tell our guys from the beginning, our goal is to get to the tournament and be part of the teams that have a chance to win the tournament. But understand that starting Game 1, that is an NCAA Tournament game, because if we don't take care of the games we're supposed to take care of, we won't get here obviously with the analytics today.

So we start from day one talking about being in this tournament and hoping to have a chance to win the whole thing. But it all starts with your first game.

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So it's been a long grind marathon for all of us. That's why I hope they don't expand. I hope they don't ask the National Championship game to have to win more than six games because it's hard. It's difficult.

But it's something you don't take for granted. You don't ever take it for granted.

Q. Coach, you made one Sweet 16 in your first seven years at Tennessee, now four straight. What do you think has changed in these last four years that's allowed you to take this program to the next level?

RICK BARNES: Well, I made a lot of mistakes, I can tell you that, back when I was younger. I think I've learned some of that, though. But I will say some of those teams that I had then, my first two years in the Big East, we were picked to finish last. We made it to the NCAA Tournament.

That was our goal. But we were picked to finish last, and you get there and you're in those 8-9, those type games, they're hard games, obviously.

But I will never take away from those teams because I know how hard they worked to get here. Those teams taught me how valuable it is and how precious it is to be a part of this tournament. And even though maybe those teams didn't win, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I haven't learned through the years. Because I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, certainly as a basketball coach.

But, like all teams in this tournament, we have what we believe in and we've stuck to it.

Q. You did kind of briefly mention expansion. When you look towards the future and you look at how many games the players are involved in right now, do you think dragging this out a little bit longer, adding more teams to it is going to be a problem solver at the end?

RICK BARNES: No, I don't think we can drag it out. I think we've got a three-week window. I do think you could do some more play-in games, things like that. Again, I don't think you can ask the national champion to play more than three weeks with what's at stake here and all that.

Again, understand, I started my career at George Mason and got beat in the championship game of the Colonial Tournament back then and I would have loved -- but we knew that's what it was.

If they want to have more play-in games -- I just think we have a three-week window where we capture this country. This is the sport that captures it. Every state can be

involved.

But even if you keep adding, there's always going to be a last four in, first four out, things like that, but there's got to be a cutoff point somewhere.

Q. Ja'Kobi, how does it feel for you to be back here a year after competing in the Sweet 16, and does it feel any different for you compared to last year?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: I mean, it feels good just to be playing with 16 teams left. We're one of those. So I think we're blessed to be here. And, yeah, it feels a little different just because it's a different team, and, yeah, Tennessee is home for me, so I feel like that's why it feels a little different.

Q. Ja'Kobi, along those lines, you were probably more recruited as a wide receiver than as a basketball player. To just go through the journey from Belmont to Maryland last year to being back home at Tennessee and here, what did you learn at each of those stops to make you who you are, and what does it mean to be here?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: I think at Belmont, I just learned how good basketball is at any level in D-I because, yeah, I played a lot of great teams when I was at Belmont. And then Maryland, I learned a lot just playing with a good group of guys. And then coming back here, I think I learned how to run a team, being more of a point guard, getting guys involved.

Q. For anyone who wants to take it, so much has been made about Nate and his raw skill set and raw talent and abilities. When you guys are just working out with him, practicing with him every day, what kind of jumps out right away?

J.P. ESTRELLA: Yeah, I mean, he's gifted in so many different ways. He's just a tall kid that just gets buckets. He does a little bit of everything. Defensively he's gotten really good since being here. I feel like he's got an unguardable jump shot in that little mid range. He just does a little bit of everything for us, and it benefits us as a team so much.

AMARI EVANS: I feel like Nate, he's a hard worker. It ain't just raw talent. He's putting in the work to get to where he's at, to put up the buckets he's putting up every day. And I feel like he's a great player to play against every day in practice.

Q. What's the challenge of this Iowa State team in trying to slow down kind of the depth pieces they have

scoring offensively and how does it challenge your defense?

JA'KOBİ GILLESPIE: I mean, I think defensively they're really good. They cause a lot of turnovers, and they get out in transition, and I feel like that's when they're at their best. Really just taking good shots and taking care of the ball is what we're planning to do tomorrow.

J.P. ESTRELLA: Yeah, kind of to piggyback off what he said, defensively they're really good. They force a ton of turnovers, so we've got to make sure that when they do try to trap our guards, we got to make sure we do a good job of finding those open spaces. And try and just pick out little spots that we know that we can find in the defense to get open shots.

AMARI EVANS: Honestly, they're amazing on defense. Probably a top 10 defense in the nation. We've just got to take care of the ball and do what we do, regardless of who we're playing.

Q. Ja'Kobi, what's the biggest way you feel like you've grown as a player since last year's tournament?

JA'KOBİ GILLESPIE: Like I said, just learning to be more of a point guard, finding guys, talking more. Just doing everything a point guard would do, because that's what Barnes has really helped me with this year. Yeah, just trying my best to get better at that every day.

Q. You guys pride yourselves so much on toughness. How much is toughness going to be a factor tomorrow night against another team that prides themselves in that area?

AMARI EVANS: I mean, we pride ourselves in it. That's what we do every day. I feel like that's a habit we have.

It's going to be huge because they're tough, we're tough, and may the best man win.

J.P. ESTRELLA: Yeah, toughness is something that we bring into every single game that we play. And I feel like we've got to bring it every single night because if we don't play with toughness, there's no chance we can win a game, especially this late in the year.

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