

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

Friday, March 27, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

**Tennessee Volunteers
Coach Rick Barnes**

Ja'Kobi Gillespie

Jaylen Carey

Felix Okpara

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Tennessee 76, Iowa State 62

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes along with student-athletes Ja'Kobi Gillespie, Jaylen Carey, and Felix Okpara. Coach, if you'd like to start with an opening statement.

RICK BARNES: One, very humbled by it. Certainly proud of our basketball team. They worked really hard. Defensively, I thought we knew we would have to have a great effort defensively. Certainly Iowa State, outstanding. T.J., outstanding program, coach.

This time of year is always tough when you lose a key guy like they did, and that's part of the tournament. That's the tough part about it, but just really proud of our guys and the effort they made and against a team that they play as hard as any team we played all year.

The start of the game, I don't think we've seen anything like that all year, and we were able to withstand it. Again, just really proud of the effort from our entire team. Everybody had a hand in us winning this game.

THE MODERATOR: Let's take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For Ja'Kobi, yesterday in the locker room a lot of your teammates described you and Nate as the leaders of the team. My question for you is what have you been able to learn from Nate, and what does he add to



the team as a freshman?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: He adds a lot to our team, on the court and off the court. He's such a great kid off the court. On the court, you obviously know he's special.

Yeah, I mean, he means a lot to us.

Q. For both Jaylen and Felix, you guys talked about the offensive glass and how important it would be. How much was that your focus tonight? Obviously plus 21, how successful were you in that endeavor?

JAYLEN CAREY: Yeah, I kind of emphasized after the Virginia game we kind of got our butts kicked a little bit on the glass. Just getting back to what we do and it's something that we emphasized all summer that we wanted to be the best on the offensive glass, and we just want to do prove that tonight and so on.

FELIX OKPARA: Yeah, just like he said. It's something we've done all summer. I look at it as our identity. We work on it every day in practice too. So we knew it was (indiscernible), we knew we could kill them on the offensive glass, and we just took advantage of it.

Q. For all of you guys, for the program, this is three straight Elite Eights. What does it mean for you guys to help with that achievement and also to do that for Coach Barnes?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Yeah, I mean, that just speaks a lot about Coach Barnes and the culture he's built here. I'm just glad that we were able to keep it up and be able to keep playing.

JAYLEN CAREY: Yeah, it's just something that we always dreamed of. I remember the first day in our meeting room, Coach Barnes said we could win a national championship, and we have the team to do it. So just taking it day by day, game by game and just, you know, being us.

Q. With the kind of night you had tonight, what did you see? What was going well for you, and what's it mean for it to happen on this stage for your team?

JAYLEN CAREY: Just, you know, my guys, they always



... when all is said, we're done.®

trust in me. I kind of had a slow year on and off here and there games, and just keep on believing in myself. Coach Barnes and the guys, they just keep on believing in me, and that just gives me all the confidence I need.

Just going out there and playing hard and just getting on the rebounds, the rebounding glass. That's just something that will get me going, and that's what I did.

Q. Jaylen and Felix, Coach mentioned you guys hadn't seen anything like what they showed you at the beginning of the game, kind of the pressure they showed you. It seemed like the offensive rebounds maybe helped stabilize you guys. I'm curious, in the moment what did it feel like? Did those rebounds feel important just to stabilize you guys to get into the game?

FELIX OKPARA: Yeah, absolutely. We knew they were going to be physical. It was a point of emphasis going into the game. We just got to be the more physical team, play more harder. We just chased every ball, and it just worked in our favor.

Q. Jaylen, you mentioned in the summer you guys -- one of your goals was to be one of the -- the No. 1 offensive rebounding team in the country. What is it about this group that makes you guys such a good offensive rebounding team? Because I think you're No. 1 in the country in offensive rebounding percentage.

JAYLEN CAREY: Yeah, just from day one, me, J.P., Felix, DB, and Cade, we all went at each other every day in practice. There were some days where we got mad at each other and wanted to fight each other, but that's just what it took to get to this point.

And I just can't wait to watch the film. I remember the first two plays. I got popped in the mouth. It was a shock for me. It got me going. It was fun going out there, rebounding the ball and playing aggressive.

Q. Felix, you were one of the few guys that was part of this game last year. How motivated were you to get back to this stage, and obviously now to do something that's never been done at Tennessee before on Sunday?

FELIX OKPARA: Very, very -- it's very important. I'm happy to be here. It shows the hard work we put in, and I feel like last year we just had some -- we had some unfinished business. We felt like we should have won that game, that Elite Eight game, but it didn't work out in our favor. This year we're going to come out on fire, and we're

going to get the job done.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys. We'll take questions for Coach Barnes.

Q. You held Milan Momcilovic to six points on 2-for-9 shooting. One of the best shooters in the nation. What was your game plan for him, and how did you execute it?

RICK BARNES: Our game plan was to give him no daylight whatsoever. We felt like if he had six inches, he could get the shot off. We didn't do a very good job. Again, give him all the credit. We felt like the turnovers, if we turned it over, which we did way too much, they could get out in transition. They're elite. And those were the ones we were most concerned about.

But we were -- if he got any separation, we were going to switch. It didn't matter who, big guy. We were going to switch. That person, we worked for a couple of days, talked about it obviously from the beginning. You're not going to leave him. You're not getting off of him. We're just going to stay there.

Obviously Bishop sets a great tone for us. Ethan guarded. But our -- Felix. There are so many good things for our guys. The game plan was not to give him one ounce of daylight.

Q. So you said on February 9th after I think the second loss to Kentucky that you don't think you had hit your peak yet, and that was a month and a half ago. What's been the key to progressing as the season has gone, and just the fact that you have nine guys contributing to winning right now?

RICK BARNES: That right there is the biggest thing, because we went all year for the most part where we didn't know what to expect from our sixth guy all the way down. We didn't know. We searched a lot of different ways trying to figure it out, and we were looking for some consistency.

Then we started, again, just trying to get guys. They would just come in, take care of the ball, and guard, we had find a way to get settled in.

Ethan is a guy that we know can guard. That's one of the things late when we signed him. But Amari picked it up. Bishop has been consistently good there all year.

As a group, they've bought into what we needed to do, and we just said we're going to put it all on the defensive end and find a way. One of the reasons we're one of the leading offensive rebounding teams is because we miss a

lot of shots we shouldn't miss. But give the guys all the credit. They like each other, and they worked hard for each other.

Q. You're headed back to your third straight Elite Eight. What's been the key for you to build sustained success at a program that had only made one Elite Eight prior to you taking over?

RICK BARNES: I don't know. I'm not sure what it is other than the fact that God has blessed me with a great job, good players. We have 11 new ones this year. We do have a standard on a lot of things. It's not just what we do on the basketball court. You know, we're pretty much a no-nonsense program. We talk about that through the recruiting process.

We tell everyone it's going to be tough. We want them to come and want to help them live their dreams, and along the way we would love to have a chance to play for a national championship.

It goes back to the entire program and just blessed that God has put so many wonderful people around us, and they work really hard. They work really hard.

Q. Jaylen mentioned he had some up-and-down moments this year. How do you kind of rate his season and the improvement that he's made? How big is it to have someone like that in a game like this?

RICK BARNES: I'm really happy because if I put all the chips on the table, I have been after Jaylen harder than anybody all year, anybody. There's days he looked at me like, man, this dude is crazy; but he never said a word, kept going. He does what he needs to do.

I'm really happy for him. I really am. But he did say what he said. He didn't miss many reps all year long with the other guys, and they really did go at each other. There were some days that got, you know, pretty physical obviously. Anytime you see someone that goes through the peaks and valleys and comes up big in a game like this, you're elated for them. You really are.

Great kid, and he was the first kid in the portal last year, other than Ja'Kobi, that we set our eyes on, because felt like we had no presence inside physically. I think he's helped all of them in some ways be more physical.

Q. Back on the streak, three straight Elite Eights and four straight Sweet 16s. After that loss to Michigan in 2022, have you changed or adjusted anything along the way here?

RICK BARNES: Not really. Not really. I'm not going to sit here and act like I've tried to figure something out, because I haven't. We try to be consistent. I try to -- as a staff, we try to be same every day.

They know what we are looking for, what we expect. You know, we coach every guy on the team, walk-ons included. We have a great group of guys at this time of year that do -- assimilate the other team's stuff. And those guys this week were awesome, and they have been all year. Because we didn't feel like we had time to teach other guys to learn their stuff, because they were still trying to learn what we were trying to get done.

Again, it's just a real blessing. I'm blessed. Again, I thank God for it.

Q. Rick, you kind of touched on it a second ago with the front court. Is this what you envisioned when you built this front court even on a night when JP has a slow night, the other guys step up and y'all do what you do?

RICK BARNES: Yeah, last year we had no post presence at all. You know, we knew at some point in time that we were going to have to get it. Again, I can't say enough about Felix's improvement, his development. JP has fought the injuries through the year. Obviously DeWayne Brown, big surprise. Probably every year you get a group of guys, someone will disappoint you, and someone might surprise you. DeWayne has been the biggest surprise. We lost Cade Phillips, which hurt us, but DeWayne gave us an opportunity to get some minutes, and obviously Jaylen.

Nate gives us a very big frontline, so we just knew that we had to somehow, somehow get some kind of presence inside. Those guys were great. We felt tonight coming into this game we were going to have to hit them hard with those short rolls, and our opposing guys were going to have to make plays, and they did a great job for us tonight. Because we knew they would guard us the way they guard everybody, and our front line did a lot of great things just handling the ball for us.

Q. If you could speak to two things about your offense. One, the extra passes on offense getting -- passing up a good shot for a great shot around the rim. Then also the extra ball handling to take Ja'Kobi off the ball and take some pressure off him some in this game.

RICK BARNES: Well, I told the team at halftime, I said, look, this isn't a game that we're going to run offense. We're going to play offense. We're going to spread it and

keep the ball in the middle third, and we're going to play.

It's what we worked on all week. That was the only time I really was getting upset, was guys bringing it down the sideline. They're great. When you are over there, you're looking for trouble. That's what we did. We stayed in the same set pretty much the entire second half. They went zone, which I was glad we were able to get something out of that.

What was your other question?

Q. On the ball handling.

RICK BARNES: Again, we've improved there all the way around, but we like to get Ja'Kobi off the ball some. One, he moves well without it, and we're able to do that because of Bishop's improvement. Certainly Ethan coming in doing it. It's a combination of guys getting better right now.

Q. I know there's a couple of guys who have been in the program on this team, but compared to the previous two teams you took here, you had some mainstays on those teams. Does this feel different with this group reaching the Elite Eight because there are so many new guys on this team?

RICK BARNES: It really hasn't hit me yet, to be honest with you. That's the honest truth.

The group we got last two years prior to this, guys from day one they were with us. We came in with 11 new players. I felt like we had improved in a lot of different areas. If we could bring it all together -- and there's -- to be very honest with you, I thought we should have won more games in the regular season, but when you turned it over the way we did the last four or five minutes, that's why we've gotten better with that over the last couple of weeks finishing games.

But those turnovers were tough lessons at the time, but we've learned from that to get us here. It's well worth it.

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