

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Tennessee vs Michigan

Sunday, March 29, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

**Tennessee Volunteers**

**Coach Rick Barnes**

**Felix Okpara**

**Ja'Kobi Gillespie**

**Grant Hurst**

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

Michigan 95, Tennessee 62

RICK BARNES: Congratulations to Michigan. They played obviously an outstanding basketball game. We're obviously disappointed. We think that we're better than what we showed today. The game was kind of where we had it in the first eight to ten minutes, and we picked up five quick fouls and it got away from us. Give them credit.

But just so proud of our guys. They've had a phenomenal year. Obviously when you get to this point and you don't move on, it's extremely disappointing, especially when you know you weren't at your best and you need to be at your best at this time.

But proud of these two guys here and Grant. Grant was a guy we brought back to help us maintain our culture with the locker room. And Felix has been amazing. And I thought Ja'Kobi in a year just endeared himself to Vol Nation, and he was fearless today.

But just unbelievably proud of this team. Really, we've gone through a lot. They've stuck together to get us to this point. And there's probably, what, 50 some teams that would like to be here today where we are even after a loss. So I'm proud of their effort.

We want more. There's no doubt we want more. We want to break through this thing. But you've got to get here first. Just so proud of the effort these guys gave it this year.

**Q. Ja'Kobi and Felix, in that first half when it ended up**



**in a 21-0 run, why was it so hard to get a bucket or get a stop?**

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Yeah, I think they was getting out in transition and we weren't getting back and they was making shots.

FELIX OKPARA: I'd say the same thing. We didn't do a great job cutting off transition. I think it was also the point of emphasis going into the game, just kind of taking on the transition game. But we didn't do a great job with that, so they took advantage of that and they converted.

**Q. I know the game just ended, but are you 100 percent committed to coming back to Tennessee next season?**

RICK BARNES: Yeah, I am.

**Q. Felix, Coach alluded to it a little bit, but a lot of new faces on this team. How did this team get to this point, and what does it mean to uphold the Tennessee standard in the way you did with a new group of guys this year?**

FELIX OKPARA: You know, we knew we were losing a lot of pieces last year and we knew it was going to be a completely new team. So guys like me, Grant, K, JP, guys we had last year, we kind of just helped the new guys, younger guys to show them the ropes.

It was definitely hard, a completely new team. But we did it to the best of our abilities. We have a great group of guys that came in and they bought in to the program and the culture. I'm just excited to be with them guys and play with them.

GRANT HURST: Myself, my two years prior to this one, we had great examples of leadership. And my role was to, as Coach mentioned before, model that and bring that intensity that those before me brought. Josiah-Jordan James, Santiago Vescovi, Zakai Zeigler, Jordan Gainey, those guys all went out the door in my two years. It was easy to model that after seeing such great examples.

**Q. Coach Barnes, do you think there was anything that could have been done differently to stop Michigan**



today?

RICK BARNES: Yeah, you know what, offensively we needed to make some shots. I also thought our post guys, I would have liked to see them touch it a little bit more at the start of the game. We know they're an outstanding transition team. And those corner threes, they're really good at that.

You've got to make some shots, too. Again, the first eight to ten minutes was like 16-16, that's how we wanted it. And right there, those next couple minutes were foul trouble, get to the free-throw line. Obviously shot a lot more free throws than we did. But we've got to score. At some point in time you've got to score the ball, too.

But those misses led to that transition game where they were able to get out, and give them credit, they were making their shots.

**Q. Ja'Kobi, third school in four years. You've won everywhere you went. I know it's fresh, but take a moment to reflect on your career and what was special about spending this fourth year at Tennessee?**

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Yeah, I'm blessed to have the career I did. I enjoyed every year. I'm forever grateful for Coach Barnes for just bringing me back home and allowing me to be the point guard of a great team. Yeah, just giving me this opportunity, I'm forever grateful for that.

**Q. For Rick, what do you think it's going to take to get over the Final Four hump? Is it just kind of luck involved, or is there more to it than that?**

RICK BARNES: Yeah, there's luck in everything you do, but you get to this point -- you look at their guys today, they had a lot of guys that played really good basketball, had good days. It's hard to have a day where maybe one or two guys are off and get there. At this time of year, your players have to play and step up.

First of all, they're a very, very talented team. They really are. You look at the teams that are going to the next round, so far they're all very talented teams. But we're a talented team, and some teams have a little more room for error than others.

But we've seen enough in this game. There's a lot of different ways to get there. But if you want to break through, you've got to get here first. You've got to put yourself in position to do that. We've been able to get here three years in a row, and it'll be hard to get back to winning games just in the tournament. That first game of the tournament in the hardest one. But our goal would be to

keep getting back and kicking and hopefully we can knock the door down.

**Q. Rick, in that first half, on that play that Yaxel got the reverse lay-up, it looked like there was goal tending on that one?**

RICK BARNES: It was definitely goal tending. The rule says the ball has got to go through the net. The ball did not go through the net.

**Q. What were you told because I saw you were trying to review it. What were you told?**

RICK BARNES: Well, they told me I couldn't. The ball has to go through the net before it's deemed a successful field goal, and it wasn't through, and the rim was held on. I asked. They said, I can't review it. Then I even asked a couple guys did they understand the ball had to go through the net, and I'm not sure they did. But the ball has to go through the net to be a successful goal.

**Q. What's it going to take to close the gap between you guys and these No. 1 seeds that y'all have faced the last three years?**

RICK BARNES: Well, we're going to have to shoot the ball better. There's no doubt. We've got to shoot the ball better. We're so inconsistent doing that. We still have to be better finishing around the rim. You've watched us all year and we missed too many of those shots. Obviously our defense got us here. It really did. It's no question. We've had games where we've struggled to score, but you're playing against an outstanding team today that was scoring. But just simply, we all have to get better. We all have to keep working at it.

We certainly know what it takes to get here, now we've got to figure out getting through to the next level, and it's on this day, you've got to really be at your best.

**Q. You mentioned the shooting a few times. What did you think of the shot selection or what were you looking for that maybe wasn't delivered out there?**

RICK BARNES: Well, we knew all year that everybody puts a big target on Ja'Kobi and we knew that -- again, we wanted the ball inside. It's really harder for him. We could get into ball screens. It's harder for him sometimes because he's often got double-team and he's got to get rid of it and that's a great time to put it in.

Now, we had open looks. We had some open shots that didn't go down, and that's where they were able to get out and capitalize.

I thought that a little bit because we weren't making shots -- not that we quit because we would never quit -- but it put us back on a heels a little bit where we had to continue to guard. Because again, that's what's got us through this tournament.

But our missed shots led to a bunch of points for them.

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