

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 13, 2021

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Rick Barnes

Postgame Press Conference

Alabama 73, Tennessee 68

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Coach Barnes.

Q. Rick, the final 30 seconds there, having Davonte in for defense, how pleased were you with the defense that he played? What do you say to him after the game about the free throws?

RICK BARNES: Just what you would think. We put him in to do the job and he did the job. He played great post defense. Came up with a big rebound. We knew exactly what they were going to do. We knew the other matchups we wanted to have. We knew he would fight his heart out.

We knew he would guard him, absolutely he would guard Herb Jones. He did probably four different times in that one possession. He came up with it.

We all feel bad for him he didn't knock those down, would have given us a chance to take the lead. But I'm proud of him because he did the job that we asked him to go in there and do. His hard work and determination got us that possession. Tough situation to put anybody in when they haven't played. That's how much confidence we have in him.

He's so loved by his teammates, everyone is hurting for him. Yet I'm proud of him because he did the job we needed done. Again, we knew exactly what they were going to do. He went in and he shut it down.

Q. What do you feel like the difference was in the second half in terms of maybe how Alabama was playing but also how you responded?

RICK BARNES: First of all, I'm really proud of our guys. We played Alabama twice, we have yet to play them with a full roster. Not in Knoxville, not today. Not having John hurt us.



When they started making their push, we were tired. Some of those turnovers were a result of that. Our guys played their hearts out on the defensive end. You look at what we did, I think we guarded them as well as they've been guarded all year. I think our guys did an unbelievable job.

We don't care if they shoot 40 threes, 15 of them is not going to beat us. We're going to get the guys that we want to shoot them to shoot them. For the most part that happened. We rebounded the ball well, got out and ran. Great job today with deflections.

When they started coming back, no doubt we were fatigued. I heard one of you ask the question what makes those come in flurries. I think what happens is some of our youth shows up. When they see that, they want to go down and get it right away.

I was concerned coming in with Yves Pons getting in foul trouble. He's playing terrific. I was really concerned about that. But looking back on it, Josiah was a plus nine in the game. Him getting in foul trouble was huge. During those times of the game when we're struggling like that, that's when he really knits it all together. We didn't have him as much as we wanted to in those situations. I felt like our offensive rhythm, when we got fatigued, we got away from it.

I'm proud of our guys. I know how hard they played, how bad they wanted to win. Sixth ranked team, we talk about turning it over 19 times. We turned them over 17 times. A couple times early in the first half, we didn't get what we needed at the rim. We got it there. Like I said, deflections were huge.

I'm proud of our guys, I really am. Looking back, there's always second-guessing, I wish I would have done something there at the end of the game to help them a little bit more. I think we got different things we use in those situations. Not having Fulky or especially Josiah in that situation, those are most of the situations we work with with those guys. That's on me.

Again, I'm just really proud of our guys.



Q. In the first half the offense was playing very well. Do you think that was one of your best if not or best offensive halves all season?

RICK BARNES: Yeah, I mean, I think we played well. I do obviously. We were 7-21. We fumbled the ball some. We get into the gas early, we picked up charges, they picked up some charges.

Again, so much of what everybody is doing right now is personnel driven. With all that said and done, think about it, Ticket made a play, gave us a chance to take the lead there against the sixth ranked team in the country. Coming into this game like that, if you asked me...

I told the team at halftime, they're going to make a run. All good teams make a run. If it turned around the other way, I would tell you exactly the same thing. Same at Florida, told them at halftime we're going to make a run, they're going to make a run. That's when we got to really come together, really execute. Again, we had our chance. Just didn't get it done.

Again, I can't tell you enough how proud I am of these guys overcoming what they had to. Losing John hurts. They lost Primo. But I'm proud. I think this tournament is going to help. Uros did some good things during the tournament. Olivier. Again, I'm proud of these guys because we had to make do with some lineups because of Fulyk being out.

That's what we've had to deal with all year. Once we think we're getting in a rhythm, something happens. I can't give these guys enough credit for hanging in there. I know this, they're excited about next week, and we should be.

Q. If fatigue is an issue with those turnovers in the second half, what do you try to do to eliminate that issue?

RICK BARNES: Well, we hope we have Fulyk back. We hope we can get in a routine. Hope that Josiah is not in foul trouble. Two of our top six guys, Joe did some things obviously. When you get those fouls, it's hard to continue to play as aggressively as he wants to play.

That would be the quickest, easiest thing. When that's not there like today, we tried to slow down, give our guys a chance. We know our players' body language. We know we're going to need timeouts. Tried to use them when we could strategically. We tried to slow it down a little bit just to let them get their breath on the offensive end because we knew we were going to have to fight really hard on the defensive end.

When I felt like the momentum swung, really swung, was when we again started turning down shots that led to turnovers.

Q. Do you expect Fulyk to be back next week?

RICK BARNES: I don't know. We haven't really discussed it. We knew he wasn't going to play today. Had no idea if he'd be ready to play tomorrow. We just talked about today. I don't have an answer for you.

Q. What would the timetable be? Is that something on John that you would make a decision right before your NCAA first round game? John did post on social media that Omar Payne reached out to him and said he made a mistake. Do you consider that case closed or do you think he should be facing anything further?

THE MODERATOR: The nature of John's injury being a head injury, he's going to be evaluated daily moving forward.

RICK BARNES: With the other, I got great respect for Florida and their program. Mike White texted me right after the game. He was upset, as any coach would be.

I've told people, I've been in situations like that over the many years I've been in it either as a head coach, assistant coach when something like that happens. It's happened a couple times with me where the person who did it you would least expect them to do it. Sometimes in the heat of battle, things happen. You don't want to see it happen. There's tremendous regret when it does afterwards.

Mike, everyone, reached out to us after the game. Omar I think did last night or this morning with John. I know Mike reached out to John. What Fulyk said I think is John Fulkerson, he accepted it. You hate to see it, but in the heat of battle, again, sometimes emotions can bring the worst out of you sometimes.

But, yeah, it's over with. It's done with. We'll get on down the road.

Q. Obviously they were doing that ball screen to get Vescovi on Jones. Before that, was that why you were going with Uros? What has Uros shown you here to earn this opportunity? How important might he be?

RICK BARNES: He's shown us in the last two weeks off when he's really honestly finally bought into exactly what we want him to do, which is exciting. It really is. Sometimes it takes players a little bit longer. His length was good. We trust him now because he's buying into the role that we need him to play. Can he be big for us? Yes,

he can. I think he's going to leave here with a lot more confidence.

Yeah, right now, again, everybody's got to be up on deck ready to go. I think those guys know that. Again, we're disappointed. We really are. We came into this game fully expecting to win, even without John being here.

Again, the mistakes we are making right now, we can still fix them. The competitiveness that we're playing with and the determination and the prep in the last really two weeks has really gone to a level that we're excited about.

Q. With the freshmen, how do you try to get them the balance being that productive but also limit the turnovers?

RICK BARNES: That's hard. That's hard because, again, both of them are very unselfish players. Both of them are very competitive. They've added so much to us in terms of a mindset to be aggressive.

Both of them, they work their butts off on both ends of the court. They're learning. They're freshmen, but I would take their competitiveness and their aggressiveness.

I do think this, they'll look at this again. They just have to eliminate the turnovers, whether fumbling the ball, continuing to drive in traffic, hold it too long. It's all fixable.

Like I said, they're both great teammates with these guys. Their teammates believe in them. They trust them. I trust them. It's a high-level game. This is a big-boy game at a high level. Our guys fought. They fought an older, experienced team I think as hard as anybody could fight them.

Like I say, we had a chance. We were right there. We thought it would be that kind of game. If you said coming into this if we could be in that position in the last minute, a chance to take the lead, we'd say let's start there and go.

Q. Now headed to Knoxville and then Indianapolis?

RICK BARNES: We'll talk about it. We'll get back to the hotel and talk about it. We'll do what we think is the right thing to do. We haven't discussed it because we were planning on playing tomorrow.

Q. Do you have a preference?

RICK BARNES: Honestly, I don't know enough about it. We'll sit down with the administration, everybody. Again, I don't know what is set up there right now. I have no idea.

We'll just decide. We'll get back and we'll do that over the next probably couple hours.

Q. You said the guys are excited about next week and they should be. What are your thoughts on where the team is going into next week?

RICK BARNES: I'm excited. I am. I just told them that. Man, I'm not going to let you guys put your heads down. I've been doing this too long. I've had teams lose in the semifinals, go on and have a great run.

I said it coming in this week, You want to be a champion. I don't care if it's the regular season, conference tournament champion, you want to be a champion. But the one you really want to be every year is in the big fight for the big one. I said that when I walked on this campus six years ago. I said it my entire career.

We want to be a team that's in this tournament every year. I've seen enough in my lifetime, more than these guys, I've seen teams get it and go.

I like where our team is right now. I'm not afraid to play whoever we got to play. This team is going to play their hearts out. They're going to go at it. That's all we can expect from them.

Q. You mentioned Davonte being a guy who doesn't play a lot. What gave you the confidence to throw him out there in such an important moment?

RICK BARNES: Well, same thing. What you're doing in practice every day. That's what he does. We knew we had to get a stop there, we knew he would do it. In a one-on-one situation, if we could have put Yves in that situation, we would have. We knew where he had to be. We knew the next guy in line would fight every bounce, which he did four different times.

There was no doubt. You ask our team who day in and day out you know is going to play his heart out, give you everything, it's Ticket. If you don't think they feel bad for him right now, I mean, they do. He plays so hard. There's times that we'd love to get him out there, but then there's times that we struggle with scoring which makes it difficult.

In that situation, we knew we had to get a stop. Again, we said we're going to put arguably two of our best defenders in that situation on that switch.

Again, he did the job. Player of the Year. He did the job. He guarded him as well as anybody four different times. Then he cleaned it up. Came out with it.

Q. Do you believe the way your team played they surpassed the expectations you had coming into this SEC tournament?

RICK BARNES: No, I don't think that. We expect to win every time we go on the floor. Again, regardless of how we might be up and down, we're always thinking that up is going to be there. This group of guys, they have proven to be resilient.

Again, I mean, we had to guard the best, arguably the two best offensive teams in the league over the last week. Florida, you look at the numbers, they're the most efficient offensively with field goal percentage, defense, shooting threes. Then you come back, Alabama, who everybody knows what they can do. Believe me, we guarded Florida twice and got two big wins. Came back today and our defense definitely put us in a position to win it. We could just get our offense, clean it up a little bit, we should feel good because the mistakes we were making here.

Again, we talk about it. We turned it over 19 times. They turned it over 17 times. It was that high level of a game. You go back I think it was 2:30 on the clock, Josiah had a great look at it. Right in front of me, I thought it was going in.

Again, I can't say enough how proud I am of these guys.

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