

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 11, 2022

## Tennessee Volunteers

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

## Head Coach Rick Barnes

## Josiah-Jordan James

## Zakai Zeigler

### Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 72-Mississippi State 59

RICK BARNES: We're proud of our guys. You know, we waited until last night to know who we're going to have to play, obviously, and they were able to come over and watch a little bit of the game, but, again, even though we play each other throughout the year, I thought with a one-day late prep and what we had to do today, our guys were locked in. And we have so much respect for Ben Howland and his team and the way he does things. They're a hard team to defend, and we knew they were going to go at us inside.

First half, both teams shot the ball well. Second half, I think a little bit effect from them playing last night, and we kept trying to push the pace, but a good win for us, and there are obviously some things we have to continue to do better.

**Q. Josiah, obviously you sat for a long period in the first half. It seems like it might have been tough to cool off and come back in, but you started so quick. Were you feeling it shooting at halftime? When did you kind of realize that, hey, I've got something going?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Nothing really felt different. Yeah, I was a little cold. I got stretched during halftime, but those are shots that I practice, and so I just trust my work, trust my teammates, and credit to them. Uros and Brandon were screening to get me open. Zakai, Kennedy and Santi were passing and putting it on the money. All the shots felt good, but credit to my teammates.

**Q. Is this game a testament to the back court depth with Kennedy dealing with an injury and y'all still scoring and finding ways to produce?**



THE MODERATOR: That question was for who?

**Q. Both. Josiah.**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I would say, yeah, our mentality throughout the year he is always next man up because you never know what's going to happen. We're thankful that Kennedy is doing well and that he is okay, but we had faith in whoever was going to come in. It just happened to be Zakai and J.P. They got a lot of the minutes, but we knew that no production -- there was going to be no production dropoff because we practice and play against each other each and every day, so we were prepared.

**Q. Zakai, I'm sure you've become so accustomed to playing along side Kennedy and alternating with him. Did anything change for you when he was kind of out trying to work that ankle out a bit?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Honestly, no, because I already knew just like Josiah said, next man up. I'm just always prepared as well as my other teammates. So I just always knew to be ready.

**Q. Zakai, Iverson Molinar had 9 points for them in the first and only 1 on an 0 of 6 shooting in the second half. How much of a point of emphasis was he slowing him down and slowing the rest of the offense?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: We knew if we continued him, it would make the game easier for all of us. So my mindset was just take him out of the game. That's all I was thinking.

**Q. Josiah, Zakai, and Kennedy had 14 assists and just one turnover. What's it like playing with those two when they have a complete feel for the game?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: It's fun. I'm thankful and grateful that I get to play with all my teammates, but specifically those guys because they just make the game so easy for everybody around them, so, yeah, it's a lot of fun playing with them when they're playing their best basketball.



**Q. Zakai, you guys talked a lot about how much faith you have in Josiah earlier in the season when his shots were not falling. What's it like seeing that run where he hits four straight three-pointers?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: It was great. I was jumping all around, waving in the air. I felt like I was making the shots. I just love seeing all my teammates do that, and especially him. Once he is knocking all them down, I felt like I was doing all that, so that's all it was.

RICK BARNES: The one you shot the air ball, did it slip?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: What air ball? (Laughing)

RICK BARNES: I think we're going to talk about that one.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Next one goes in, man.

RICK BARNES: That's right.

**Q. This is for Josiah. Brandon Huntley-Hatfield had ten points. It seemed like he was a force in there with John Fulkerson. What is it about him? What does he bring to the game, especially this type of situation in the tournament?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: His mentality. When he wants to play physical and when he is playing at his best and imposing his will, I mean, it's really hard to stop him. I know firsthand because I have to guard him.

I'm happy to see him grow throughout the year. The way he is playing right now is really what we need, and it's no surprise to us, but when he really puts his mind to it and tries to impose his will, those are the results that we get.

**Q. Josiah, you have been shooting the ball well for the last three or four games, not just tonight. Is it just one of those things in a rhythm, superstition, eating the same thing for breakfast? Just what is it lately?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Just trusting my work, and my teammates having faith in me, my coaches having faith in me. They give me the utmost confidence. Those guys and everybody in the locker are always telling me to shoot. The next one is going in, and I truly believe that. I just say trusting in my teammates and trusting in my work because I put the time in, so I think it's going to pay off.

**Q. J.J.J., what do you prefer more, hitting those threes or do you prefer getting a stop on the defensive end?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Hmm --

RICK BARNES: I can answer that for you. He likes to win.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Exactly. Whatever helps us get the win in the win column, that's all I care about. They're both fun though. They're really both fun.

**Q. Rick, just kind of stepping away from the game, I'm not sure if you have seen this news yet, but Cuonzo Martin is out at Missouri given he is the former coach in your position at Tennessee, I just kind of wanted to get your reaction to that and kind of your thoughts?**

RICK BARNES: Disappointed. I think this year you're going to see some -- first of all, there's not a finer person in the business than Coach Martin. If I had a son, I have said it before, I would love for him to play for him.

I think you see this year where the transfer portal a year ago stripped some programs where they had some things going, and you build to a point where like you're asking me right now where we are, it's hard not for me to sit here and think in three weeks, four weeks, whatever the season with that next part is going to happen, and we don't know. I can't tell you one thing about what I think would happen with our program.

Coach Martin and Tom Crean, both of those guys, one thing I know they're both terrific basketball coaches. Knowing Coach Martin better, I can tell you this, I've got two adopted black grandchildren, and I called him one day and said, help me through this. Tell me what I need to know as a grandfather. My daughter was having some issues that she wanted an answer to, and Cuonzo's wife talked with my daughter, and so I look at him in a whole different light.

I know this, if I were an A.D. somewhere, he would be the first guy I would want to go get him because I know him, and I know where his heart is in terms of the game of basketball. He has always done it right.

Again, I said when I went to Tennessee that I thought that he had walked into a tough situation there and handled it with great class. Again, when I went to -- the first time I saw Coach Martin after I had accepted the job at Tennessee, he had nothing but glowing remarks about Tennessee and said, hey, they have a great basketball base. You're going to love it, and so I have great respect for him.

It saddens me, to be honest with you, because, again, he is not just a guy that I have competed against, but a guy that, like I said, has given me wonderful advice over the years in a lot of different areas.

**Q. Coach, two quick questions. 21 assists on 29 made field goals today. Is that the best you have shared the ball all year?**

RICK BARNES: We do a good job normally. We're not dribbling the air out of the ball and we're moving the ball, cutting and they made us dribble a little more than we probably wanted to tonight because, again, they're extremely well-coached team, and they were putting some pressure on us, but when we're moving the ball and we have player movement, ball movement, that's when we play our best basketball. We don't have one guy on the team that's selfish, and so that's how we normally like to play.

**Q. Coach, your college roommate at Lenoir-Rhyne became the winningest college coach at Lenoir-Rhyne. How much influence did Johnny Ray have on Ricky Ray?**

RICK BARNES: A lot. I told everybody as a young kid, I didn't -- I had heard about the word intensity, but I didn't know what the definition was until I met John Lentz. As a senior freshman, he let me move in. He was a dorm resident. He let me move in and keep what scholarship money I had. He is like a big brother to me, and obviously his son, Brian, is on our staff and has done a great job for us. John, wonderful person, certainly a great mentor when I needed it.

**Q. Coach, first quickly, do you have an update on Jonas? Jonas and his -- looked like he had a wrist injury; is that not true?**

RICK BARNES: You mean why he didn't play when we picked up quick fouls? Again, he was getting buried in there a little bit too deep. He hit pretty hard. I don't know if he did or not. I didn't -- if he did, I don't -- the reason, we felt like Brandon got it going. Fulky and Uros, those three guys were doing a terrific job. We knew at some point we would move Joe down and slide him over there to go with the smaller line-up, but I don't --

**Q. You mentioned Brandon. What about his game, his first postseason game. It looked like he had it going early.**

RICK BARNES: He did, and I think that, again, when he gets locked in on the defensive end and rebounds the ball and brings his physicality, I mean, he really helps us. He really does.

When he is really locked in, he is a good defender. He has learned to do that. He has learned to really utilize our

scouting reports and now it's about being consistent. He is learning that the game is faster. He has really good hands, and I told him, I said you're losing -- you're losing the ball too much because you're putting yourself in a crowd by holding the ball too much. You're going to have to -- if you don't play quicker, people are going to come strip it and take it from you. When he plays with the quickness that he is capable of, he can score baskets.

**Q. Rick, what went into the decision to put Kennedy back in there over the final nine minutes or so, and how do you kind of balance wanting to keep that -- one of your leaders healthy going into the NCAA tournament versus trying to win this tournament?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I listen to him and our trainers. One concern we had coming in, you know, we hadn't played, and we really -- the last -- we took a long time off after our game Saturday. When you take that much time off trying to get guys healthy -- I thought Zakai got better because he literally has not practiced ten minutes since we played Arkansas. I thought early he -- but I thought he did -- again, the game got better, he got better.

I think it's hared this time of year if you don't keep your reps. In Kennedy's situation, I said to him, if I see you limping, you're coming out of the game. He said I'm not limping. I said I think you are limping. He said I got kicked or something. I said is it the ankle? He said, no. I was kidding with him back there. Is it up to him? I said to him, how do you feel? He said, I'm fine. We have to trust him on that.

**Q. Coach, five players in double figures, a sixth player with eight. Is that kind of a dream to have that kind of balance in a game?**

RICK BARNES: Well, we're at our best when we have that balance, but we also -- I think our guys have learned tonight when a guy has it going, to get to him. And I thought they did a really good job of that with Joe. We had a couple -- and, you know, Mississippi State was pushing us into deeper possessions.

We were going to have to continue to move, but we did. Tonight I thought we did do a better job of putting the ball on time and right in the shooting pocket. I mean, that's something we talked about all year, delivering the ball when it needed to be delivered and letting guys get set up before we give it to them too soon. When we're playing our best, yeah, we're playing with great balance.

**Q. Rick, with Kennedy, what was the injury, and how concerning is it when you see a player three times in the same game go down holding an ankle like that?**

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RICK BARNES: You know what, it's always concerning with players, but I've had players that I can tell you one time years ago when T.J. Ford who went down, and I thought he was really, really hurt, but I had gotten to know him so well, I walked over to him. We were at Madison Square Garden. I said, are you hurt? He literally looked up at me and said where is the camera? He wasn't hurt. He was playing to the camera.

As a coach, yeah, you are always concerned when you see a player go down or you see them coming out limping because guys want to play, but like the one when he came out when I asked, I said you're limping. He said I got kicked. He didn't say it was his ankle. He said I got kicked. That happens when you are in a flurry when he was underneath the basket there.

You are always concerned about it because in this time of year, again, all you can do is try to rest them. We got the best medical staff. We got the best trainer in the business, best performance coach. They'll work all night with those guys and make sure that anything and everything that can be done, they'll do it.

**Q. John had eight points tonight, six rebounds. Going back to whenever you decided to put him on the bench, how do you feel like he has responded to this point and kind of finding his groove again?**

RICK BARNES: On senior night, we had to ask if he wanted to start his last senior. He said, no, I don't. I want to stay in this role. He feels like he is better coming off the bench. He feels like he can see the game and see where he needs to go in and be effective.

I thought he passed the ball well tonight. We got him up there in the high -- we were going with some ball screen action where we're getting that short roll and letting him kind of see what he could do with it, and he is really good out there whether he dribbles, passes, whatever. He makes the right things. He is happy in that way, so we're going to go that way with him.

**Q. Coach Barnes, after this year, this event will go to Nashville for a long time. Do you like the diversity of coming to a different place, having your fans travel to a different place, and I know for you and your players, it's the hotel and the gym, but do you have any sense for what this place offers for your event?**

RICK BARNES: They're doing a great job here, but, obviously, I'm partial to Nashville. I would always be partial to the state of Tennessee and what we have there, but since I've been here, we went to St. Louis. They did a

terrific job with the tournament. They've done it here, but if you are asking me, I would like to have it in Thompson Boling Arena. The fact is, obviously I always will favor Nashville.

Thank you, guys.

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