

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Tennessee Volunteers

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Rick Barnes

Kennedy Chandler

Uroš Plavšić

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 69, Kentucky 62

RICK BARNES: I think it was exactly what both teams thought it would be, just a hard-fought game from start to finish. And both teams played so hard defensively, and baskets were really hard to come by, and the ebbs and flows of the game. It felt like they were fighting every possession just to get something done on both ends of the court, but Kentucky is an outstanding basketball team. And I said before I think they're as good as any team in the country, and I think the team we're playing tomorrow is as hot as any team in the country.

Again, this time of year, that's what you expect. I think that's what fans are expecting, and that's what they got today. I think that's what they expect tomorrow.

Q. Kennedy, with about eight minutes left, Kentucky they cut it to single digits at 8 points. You come out after the timeout with two big buckets back-to-back. What's going through your mind right there? And as a freshman, how did you feel in that moment?

KENNEDY CHANDLER: Me knowing that during that timeout Coach said they got their run, so we knew coming out of that timeout we have to step our game up and get some stops on the defensive end, and that's what we did. I got my two back-to-back buckets and got us going, you know, got our energy back up and led to us getting a win and getting more stops after that. To me, the timeout was very important for us after them getting that run.

Q. Kennedy, how healthy is your ankle, and how much did you have to do the last few hours to be ready to play tonight?



KENNEDY CHANDLER: It was hurting yesterday, but my mindset was to get as much treatment as I can to come back and play today, but I knew I wasn't going to force myself to play if I wasn't available to play today. I got as much treatment as I could and coming back with my team and played this game to get the win.

Q. Kennedy, Kentucky really struggled shooting threes. What was the plan defensively, and what do you attribute that to, their poor shooting?

KENNEDY CHANDLER: Knowing who the shooters are, and knowing who to help off of, and honestly, the knock-down shooters are, and great close-outs is one thing. Coach Schwartz talked to us about getting hot close-outs and contesting the shots, and that's what we did.

Q. One for the big guy. When you come into this game, it looked like it was going to be played at 10.5 and 11 feet. How important was it for you guys to control the glass?

UROŠ PLAVŠIĆ: You just know you're going against a really good rebounding team. And you know, we lost a rebounding battle in Knoxville. So we knew we had to come back and just be aggressive on both ends of the floor.

You know, you're going against the best rebounder in the country, obviously, and you just have to make sure that you block him out every single time, me going after every ball. I think we did a really good job in the first half. Second half, they made some changes with that, and they were more aggressive on the defensive glass, and we gave up some offensive rebounds that we didn't have to, but I think it was pretty good effort all around the team.

Q. Uroš, you guys have been on a pretty incredible run since that Kentucky game at Rupp. What has it been like being on this team the past two months, and how have you guys gotten everything rolling to this place?

UROŠ PLAVŠIĆ: I talked about it earlier. You know, this

team has great chemistry, and you know that is something that these guys -- I love about this team. We are together a lot off the court, and I love every single one of these guys like they are my brothers.

There's nothing that can get in between us and stuff like that, and I think that the fact that we are really close, it makes us compete against each other really hard in every single practice. And I think that shows in the games.

So we have great leadership on the team, and I think that is really important at this time of the year, having your leaders going through these games leading younger guys, so I think that is what it is.

Q. For both of you guys, how much more does it mean when you play Kentucky? Just seems like there's a lot of emotion attached to that game, and, also, how important is it to win this program's first SEC tournament title since 1979?

THE MODERATOR: Kennedy, would you take that first?

KENNEDY CHANDLER: Coach is always before every single game have a championship mindset, and that's what we've been saying ever since. Every single game, honestly, you have to have that championship mindset. Our goal is to play Monday night NCAA tournament championship game, and that's our mindset.

We just treat Kentucky as a regular team and know that they're going to come and give us their all and treat every single game as a championship game. That's what Coach always tells us.

THE MODERATOR: Uroš.

UROŠ PLAVŠIĆ: This is my first time in a game like this. And honestly, our preparation for every single opponent is different. You know, that means that it's different for Kentucky as well. You know it is a rivalry game, and we like playing Kentucky, so it's always maybe a little more emotions going through your body and stuff like that than other games, but we respect every single team in this league, and it's going to stay that way. So no matter who we play, we're going to give them our best.

Q. Uroš, I see a big gash on your arm. Is that emblematic of just how tough a rivalry this is that it's one you'll bleed for?

UROŠ PLAVŠIĆ: This is from last night's game, honestly, so -- (Laughing).

Q. Never mind.

UROŠ PLAVŠIĆ: Yeah.

Q. Kennedy, it seemed like any time Kentucky made a run coming out of a timeout, Coach Barnes put the ball in your hands. What did that kind of confidence mean to you?

KENNEDY CHANDLER: Coach Barnes has great trust in me and know I'm going to deliver the ball to my teammates or find a great shot to get the ball, but our mindset getting into offense and find a great shot to get, always get the ball above the rim, and we don't want to have a shot clock violation or turnover, so my mindset was get a great shot, find somebody open, and that was our goal coming out of the timeout and just putting the ball in my hands.

Q. Rick, that first game in Lexington when Kentucky shot 67%, but the next two meetings you've held them to 34% shooting both times. Did you do anything differently or was it just that game in Lexington was just a total aberration?

RICK BARNES: Did we do anything differently? Yeah. I thought it was a major learning game for Kennedy Chandler because he was as bad in that game as he has been in the other games, and he was at that point in time in the season he was still just trying to reach.

I know people when they talk about defensive players, they look at skills and things like that, but we were having some good possessions. And then early in the game, he was responsible for the first six points in Lexington. And I think that was a major game for him to understand that when you play against the quality of players at this level that you've got to be solid throughout the possession, and then so that was -- that and then they got it going, and it was a game where you turn them loose. They can do that, and they got loose.

But even with that said, I think with a couple and what we showed our guys, with I think two minutes to go in that game, we were still only down four at halftime. And then they turned us over and took it up to 10, 12 real quick, and we never recovered, but Kentucky has had a great year.

I mean, they are -- I've said it, and I just think our league deserves so much more credit than it's getting overall, but we've got teams in this league that now I'm hoping that once get into the big tournament that we can as a league show well, but it's been a hard fought regular season for all of us.

Q. Coach, you touched on the defense a little bit, but just how proud are you of that end of the court and



especially when you are playing so many freshmen?

RICK BARNES: Well, we are -- and again, we are proud of the fact that they have bought into that, and that's what I think -- again, I think most teams in the league want -- most of the teams certainly want to hang their hat on their defense.

I was concerned myself in the first half with Tshiebwe being on the bench because I knew they were going to come out, and they were going to force-feed that ball to him, which they did a good job. We were fighting as hard as we could with as many guys down there. Uroš did as much as he could do.

Early here today I thought we dodged a couple of bullets because they did have a couple of looks early from the three, and they were able to tighten up. At the end of the game, we came off a couple of shooters that we shouldn't have there late, but defensively that's been their most consistent thing that we've done all year. And tonight when they were making a run, really basically I said it's not a play-calling game. This is a players' game. You guys have it going this far, and you have to keep playing.

We were able to get loose there with a few back-cut layups and then got to force -- Kennedy got downhill one time. Again, the players and our coaching staff, they did a great job getting ready for this.

Q. You mentioned Texas A&M earlier. I'm just wondering if there's a specific instance in your head of when you have had to play a team as hot as they are, and what's it like playing a team that's essentially playing for its season tomorrow?

RICK BARNES: Last year Oregon State in the NCAA tournament, they were as hot as any team coming in. They got flipped. Got to give Buzz and his staff great credit. For them to go through the roller coaster that he did and put it together at the right time, I mean, it's a really terrific story for college basketball right now and why conference tournaments mean something for those teams that maybe didn't have the regular season they wanted, and that's what makes this time of year a special year. As we know, they play hard, aggressive, and they're going to do it again tomorrow. No doubt about it.

Q. To the point, Rick, about conference tournaments and their importance, for you, how much does this mean? You have the big tournament coming up here, but obviously, it has been a long time for Tennessee. You guys got to this stage a few years ago. How important is this just single game for this program and for you?

RICK BARNES: I think any coach would tell you that this time of year, you want to win basketball games. I mean, you do. People say, well, you might be better off to leave, go home, and regroup. I don't know of any coaches that I've ever been around that thought like that.

This time of year, every game is a playoff game. Every game is a championship game. And you have to be ready. And you want to be playing your best basketball because we also know that it can go the other way real quick. You want to keep building that momentum, but you realize you're going to be in a dog fight or fist fight or rock fight every single night. This is what you prepare for.

Q. Rick, in 2019 when this scenario played out on Sunday, you said you could tell your team on Saturday didn't have much left. It was an emotional win. How do you avoid that this time around?

RICK BARNES: Well, the last time we were in this situation, it was against Kentucky as well. It was one of those games that we had a quick turnaround to play again. We had to really expend so much energy the night before, but these guys are young. I tell you, they are. And I like to think that our older guys, they talked about the chemistry, the maturity with our leadership. It will be on them to get it. We'll talk about it, but it's going to be on them to truly focus and put the phones down. And they have done a good job of that when it's time to come in and get our game prep ready. They've done a good job of that really pretty much all year long, and we'll have to continue.

Q. Rick, late in that game before it was over when you guys had pretty much sealed the game, you had a pretty authoritative and excited slap of Mike Schwartz and then some quick hugs. Can you walk us through a little bit of your emotions at that moment?

RICK BARNES: I thought our guys had prepared so hard, and I kept thinking we have to get this done for them and our coaching staff. I have the best coaching staff in the country, and they work so hard. For us to play like we played and then we got sloppy, but, again, Kentucky had a lot to do with that, but I've been with Mike -- he was my very first GA. I have known him my entire life, it seems like. Certainly from the time I met him as a walk-on when he walked on our team at Texas, and then became our first GA and how hard he works.

Again, each one of my guys when they prepare, they all have their different way of doing it. They know how we want it done. For them to look at him and see because he -- I called him last night at 11:30. I went back, and I said what are you doing? He said, Coach, I just ordered a pot

of coffee. If you need me, I'll be up for the next three years. That's what we went through my mind.

Q. Seems like Kentucky really put an emphasis on taking away the three-pointer. Just how important was what you got offensively from Brandon and some of the other guys in the front court?

RICK BARNES: Brandon is getting better each time out. Again, every play is a huge play. I thought the play of the game, to be honest with you, was Santi's rebound at the end. That was a big-time play by him.

Brandon, again, what he did, and our post guys trying to guard Tshiebwe is so difficult because they do so much stuff to get him the ball, and he does a great job of doing his work early. They know what they're looking for to get it to him. They bring speed at you. When.

We bog down, it's really when we stop playing fast really. Both teams were getting up and down the court pretty quickly, but again, just a great team effort by everyone.

Thank you, guys.

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