

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 13, 2022

Tennessee Volunteers

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Rick Barnes

Josiah-Jordan James

Kennedy Chandler

Santiago Vescovi

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 65, Texas A&M 50

RICK BARNES: Well, my first thought is that Texas A&M should be in the NCAA tournament. I think that the job that Coach Williams and his staff did through this tournament, I felt all year that the SEC was the best basketball league in the country. And for them to do what they did over four days was really remarkable. Again, they deserve to be in the tournament.

Very proud of our team. These guys have worked hard. They deserve what they've been able to achieve here, but I truly thank the good Lord for the blessing to be associated with them and the opportunity that I've been given at the University of Tennessee. We have great leadership there. This game today was what we thought it would be. We knew they were going to fight.

Even when we got off to a great lead, in a timeout, say these guys are not going to go away and they went zone, and we did not handle it very well. It was a great move on their part. It slowed us down, and we didn't get the movement that we wanted, and that's on me, but the fact is that we defended the way that we're capable of and made big shots when they made a push to get back. Santi through that stretch, I think he scored seven, eight, nine points in there, which was a big part of the game to give us a little bit more breathing room.

Q. (Off micro) March is guard play gets more important. What do you think about the play you're getting from those three guys, Josiah, Santi, and Kennedy?



RICK BARNES: When you think about our guard play, they pretty much have -- we in the past we've been more of an inside-out throw to a post guy play through, but these guys have learned to give us a post presence with their cutting and their penetration with the ball.

Again, the way they've grown into the confidence they have for each other is really something that we're all proud of, and as you know, it is key. It really is, but all of them at different times throughout the game today made big plays for us.

Q. Rick, as your team was getting the trophy, Donde Plowman and Danny White were getting it, and you were standing far off to the side watching them clapping. Why was it important for you to be over there, and what was that scene like for you?

RICK BARNES: I think it's their time. I've been doing this a long time, and I kept telling them the last couple of days, this time of year is about players. It's not about plays. It's about players and players making plays. It's something that they'll forever enjoy throughout their life, and I have been doing this a long time, and I think it's their time. I really do. I think it's their time, and I'm so proud of them because I know the work they put in, how hard they've trained.

And, again, I just think it's their moment. It's their time to get the trophy. It's their time to cut the nets down. They came to Tennessee to help us make it a special place. They've done that. It's truly their time.

Q. Rick, it's been a while since Tennessee did this. Why was this weekend different? Why was today different?

RICK BARNES: I think it started a year ago when we had lost. We came back, and I remember an article I read about Michael Jordan talking about leadership, and I actually said to him, I don't think we can go any further unless it comes from you guys.

From that day Josiah, Santi, those two guys in particular, I think, not only because -- when they were out with injuries,

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their involvement, it was incredible the leadership where it changed. It felt like a month ago, a little over a month ago, when they started coaching each other during the game where they were open to each other. Even if it was something, hey, that's a tough shot. We have to get better. We said for us to move forward, we're going to have to have great leadership because we've always been a team that practiced hard and done all those type things, but in the game and watching these guys take over and talk, communicate, it's been fun, but that's where it started a year ago with them deciding that, hey, the leadership had to really come from within, and we've gotten it.

Q. Rick, I'm just wondering what this particular achievement means to you and your players? It seemed like there was a lot of emotion afterward, especially John Fulkerson and the guys?

RICK BARNES: I said it I think yesterday. This time of year, everybody wants to win. They want to keep winning. That's what we do, and Fulky, I have been at the University of Tennessee seven years. He has been a part of six of them, and last year was a tough year for him and the way it ended, but for him to come back, and I think the emotion he has carried for a long time. He went into a totally different role this year, which he fully accepted. You look at him, and you look at our teams, we're like all teams. You go through the ups and downs of being on the roller coaster of a college basketball season, but these guys have had the chemistry amongst themselves where they have all in so many ways stepped aside with whatever they might have as their own goals to say the biggest thing is this team and this program.

They pull for each other and play for each other, and it's really fun to see. I think this time of year when you talk about teams that are winning, I think that's probably the common denominator with most of them.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to go to student athlete questions here so we can get them out. Raise your hand, questions for any of the student athletes. Let's start on the front row in the middle where.

Q. Coach just mentioned chemistry, Josiah, you're a big part of that. Can you speak to the chemistry on this team, and how do you feel that shows up on the court?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I've said it since the summertime early in the season that this is the closest group of -- the closest team that I've had since I've been here. That's not a knock on any other team, but it's a praise to this team about how much we care about each other on and off the court.

Last year was tough because of COVID. I think that this year we came into a role where we really didn't want to take anything for granted, so we started doing things -- doing more things on and off the court just to build our chemistry, just to hang out more, and we truly do like each other. We really do.

The brotherhood that we have in this locker room, I wouldn't want any other guys in our locker room. I wouldn't trade them for the world. I think that just helps us on the court. We've been playing with each other for a pretty good -- a long time now, and so we have a feel for each other. I feel like this chemistry is second to none.

Q. (Off mic) Maybe there was a leadership void after that loss to Kentucky at Rupp. Just kind of what changed in the last month and a half that kind of allowed you all to turn the season around and cut the nets down today?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I just feel like we just kept chipping away at it. I feel like -- I feel like everything happens for a reason. We took -- we started off SEC play 2-3, and a lot of people doubted us, but we in the locker room, everybody, coaches and players included, never really held our heads down. We just came in and worked each and every day, and that's what Coach Barnes requires. That's what our coaching staff requires, and that's what we started to require out of each other just to keep getting better each and every day.

We knew it was a long season, but we just -- I mean, it's just a daily grind here. I feel like we kept taking steps to get better, and we still have a long way to go, but that's what led us to this point today.

Q. Josiah, Rick mentioned this started a year ago with that article about Michael Jordan and leadership. How vivid are your memories of that moment? Was that after Oregon State or after the SEC tournament?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: It's very vivid. It was after Oregon State, and I remember sitting in the locker room, and it was a long passage, and that was the day we got back from wherever we were. Yeah, Indianapolis. That was the first thing when we came together as a group this year over the summer. That was the first thing he put up. It was the last thing from last season, and the first thing from this season talking about leadership and how hard it is. You're not going to be liked all the time, and how Michael Jordan led his team and what type of leader he was.

That memory is very vivid. He preached that at the start of



the season, and it just kind of spewed it out at everybody else. Three guys up here, especially Santi, we took it on our shoulders because we did not like how last season ended, and so we just tried to do what Coach asked of us and it led us to this point.

Q. Kennedy, you get an injury to your ankle two, three minutes in the first game of the weekend. What did it mean for you to win MVP and play through that injury?

KENNEDY CHANDLER: That wouldn't have happened without these two guys and my teammates to make this happen. I know I twisted my ankle, but I wanted to fight through, come back and play with my guys and win the SEC championship, and that's what happened today.

Q. When you guys got done cutting the net, you looked to him pretty fast and ran to wrap that net around his neck. What did it mean to be able to do that, and what was the moment like for both of you?

THE MODERATOR: Josiah.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: This man right here means the world to me. I owe him my life. He took a chance on me. He gave me the opportunity to go to the University of Tennessee to be coached by him, and I never want to take it for granted, and so just to see all of our hard work, I mean, he pushes us each and every day. He never takes a day off, and so it's just a lot of emotion came out of us, but we have to credit him because without him, we wouldn't be here, and without him, I wouldn't be half the player and half the man I am, so I just have so much love for him.

SANTIAGO VÉSCOVI: Going off what Jo said, I think Coach means a lot to every single one of us on the team. He was one of the biggest parts of this whole process. I think in terms of leadership, he did a great job too. Also setting us up for being leaders ourselves. Whenever we were cutting the net, Jo came up to me, and we looked at each other, and we're like, yeah, we need to get Coach. We know he is not going to go up there to get it. We know how much he means for every single one of us and for the whole team, so we wanted to share that moment with him too, especially knowing he took a chance on every single one of us coming to the University of Tennessee, coaching us and keeping us at work every single day.

He has probably watched more film than anybody else in this world, so he puts the work in every single day, and I think, yeah, we just wanted to share that moment, that really cool moment, with him.

Q. For any of you guys, how well do you think you defended here this week and especially defending the

three-pointer?

THE MODERATOR: Santiago, would you take that one?

SANTIAGO VÉSCOVI: Yeah. I think that the whole team did a great job. I think the defensive part, it's our identity. That's what we strive for. I think the Coach has done a really good job putting us in a good spot to be successful putting us in a great spot to -- in terms of scouting, knowing who we're playing against, how do we have to guard every single team. They did a great job of that.

Also, I think the players did a great job also. We did a great job putting our bodies on the line every single time, leaving everything, our hearts and our bodies on the court on every single play, and we just wanted it, so we knew what it was going to take, so I think we did a terrible effort on the court. It was just amazing to see everybody put their body on the line.

Q. You could have gone anywhere in the country, and you chose to play for him. How satisfying is it to have the season you had, win the SEC tournament, win the MVP award. Do you feel like it went according to plan?

RICK BARNES: You asking him that two months ago or today?

KENNEDY CHANDLER: You know, I came to Tennessee for a reason. I knew Coach Barnes was going to push me to be the best player I could be, and that's what we did from the jump. Just by watching film with him, just I came to Tennessee and thought I was going to come here, and it was going to be easy, but Coach Barnes let me know every game is going to be difficult. Every game is not going to be easy. You're going to see different things, different reads. And that's one thing I learned since I came to Tennessee. He has taught me so much. I can't even say all of it honestly, but I just love him for that, and I want him to push me every single day to be the best player I can be and that is what he has done ever since I have been here.

Q. Going back to the Texas game where Josiah missed that shot at the end, it seemed like there was something about that missing the shot, and he took over the next four to five weeks and took his game to a different level. Did you notice anything from that?

RICK BARNES: I didn't put a lot of emphasis on me going back to Texas. I just said, hey, this is business. I know they're going to do -- and I'm appreciative of what they did, but Jo -- I know how badly they wanted to win that game for me. I really did.

When I finally got to the locker room, Jo was very, very upset, and I said, hey, this is going to help us in the whole process of what we're trying to do. I love you for -- again, I know how bad he wanted that shot to go in, but that was really in some ways a big turning point for -- I felt Kennedy. After the game, we talked about it before, he had a real man-to-man talk with T.J. Ford that I think really helped him.

He has had a total different focus since then, but I've never questioned Josiah since he has been here. He came in, and think about it. He had to start out, we didn't have a point guard. He had to play it. Santi came in. Those two guys helped us really stabilize our program when it was teetering because of who we lost. Lamonte Turner getting injured and had couldn't finish the year. Those two guys have been a dream, and any coach would want to coach them.

Q. How do you balance enjoying this and trying to quickly turn the page?

RICK BARNES: For me -- I mean, I want those guys to enjoy it. I have never been one to enjoy a lot until after the season is over with and you reflect on it because I'm always thinking next, next, next, but I'm really happy that these guys -- they should enjoy it because it's very hard to win a championship at any level, regular season, postseason, conference tournament, NCAA. It's hard.

When they do it, it's something they should enjoy it, and I'm really ecstatic for our program, but for these guys and for our university. I can't say enough again about our fans, the ones that could get here. They were awesome. They made their presence felt here again today.

Again, for me personally, I just have said it before, I just -- the good Lord has blessed me in so many ways and having a chance to be with this group is special. I can't say enough about my coaches. Santi mentioned it. The job they do with our game preparation has just been phenomenal across the board, and, again, the one thing I told -- when they told me about cutting nets, I said I'm not cutting them down until you get Chad, Garrett, Mary Carter all the people behind us that make this thing go that people don't realize.

I think that it's great that they wanted to get our managers and GAs and everybody up there because we have a special family, where all we talk about is getting better each day, and I think this group has tried to do that.

Q. Y'all lost Yves, Keon, Jaden and have gotten better defensively this year. Just how has that happened?

RICK BARNES: What?

Q. How have you gotten better defensively after losing --

RICK BARNES: I think a couple of things. Santi and Jo probably don't get enough recognition for their defense, and they're both in elite shape.

If you really wanted write a great story, ask Garrett about how many miles Santi has ran this year. He has probably ran I'm going to say 30 miles, 40 miles more than anybody on our team because when those guys are in practice, they don't want to come out unless we pull them out. They want to stay. They want to get their work done like that, but Zakai came in. He brought us something. Really and truly we thought we were going to redshirt Zakai. We did.

I said to our guys towards the end of the summer, I said I don't want to ever be caught without a point guard, and I said we always take projects, mostly post players. That's what we've always done. Then this was going on when the championship was going on, and they said, hey, both Mike and Rob saw him, and we got on him, and he came in late, as we know, but then his presence was felt very quickly, and I have said all along, he and Santi have been the biggest teachers for Kennedy because of the way Santi is relentless and the way that he goes at it.

And Kennedy I will tell you when he first got here had no one ever defend him like Zakai. No one that defended him like Santi in a different way, but I think it started with that, the attitude in practice with those guys getting at it.

Then we knew we had some young post guys and guys that had not ever been in primetime roles that we're going to have to get ready in the post, and you guys have watched us practice. You know we start every day with our defense. We'll continue to do that, obviously.

Q. Talking about the article about Michael Jordan, how difficult is it when you have a team of nice guys that like each other this much to get them to sort of be willing to be frank and open like that on the court?

RICK BARNES: Well, I think at the end of the year when things end -- last year was a totally different year, so, again, it was different in so many different ways, but coaching is hard in terms of you want to demand the very best from every player, and sometimes players feel like it's not the right way to go about it, and it's our job to figure out what is the best way to coach and motivate each individual player.

But with that said, the championship teams, the great

teams, you know it comes from within. Basically that article was Michael Jordan talking about where he wasn't afraid, and he talked about how difficult it is to call your teammates out, but yet, love them the same way off the court, but understand we're on the floor.

We've got work to take up here. The biggest thing was wanting to be coached in terms of letting your guard down and not being afraid to let your guard down and accept what you really are good at and being willing to work at the things that you need to work at.

I can remember vividly when Jo and Santi were out early in the season how hard they coached on the sideline where they were constantly coaching the guys, and we had a lot of young guys out there, and we're young. There's been times this year where we've had three or four freshmen on the court, but again, their leadership I think is truly the difference in where we've been in the last couple of years.

Q. Coach, in 1960 the U.S. beats Russia in the hockey, but the gold medal game is the next one. You spent a lot of emotional capital against Kentucky. How important was it to remind the guys one more step?

RICK BARNES: Well, we did address it that we've been here before and that actually again today, again, I'll give really great credit to my coaches. They're always looking for angles to keep these guys present in the right now and to stay in the moment. Coach Gainey today pulled up a clip of Kobe Bryant, and they were up two games, and the reporter said you don't seem like you're very happy. He said, "We're not done. We're not finished." It's hard. They're kids, and they should enjoy this, but we came here.

We started talking four, five weeks ago about every game is playoff game because we knew we were still wanting to try to stay in the hunt for an SEC regular season championship, and we came here. The message was on Friday night, this is the championship game. We said yesterday, this is the championship game. We said it again today. This is the championship game.

That was something that Coach Sanderson always said, in tournament time -- if you don't play it like it, there will be no tomorrow. We also tried to just stay with our routine that we do, but there's, again, my assistants do just an incredible job, not only what we do as time, but working behind the scenes, talking to them, delivering messages that we think each individual guys -- I will tell you this, the guys that don't play, it's really hard when you go to them and tell them because when we go into a game, we don't know exactly how it's going to shake out, but I can't tell you how many times, for instance, D.J. Bailey, Jahmai, Quentin, you have got to be ready.

It's hard as player to think, hey, maybe I'm going to get to play and not get to play, but the way those guys have continued to hold to the rope because we go into games thinking, hey, we might need those guys. And so, again, I'm really proud of not just the guys that we see out there, but it's those other guys that are in practice every day doing what they need to do to stay ready when their number is called.

Q. You said you were planning on red shirting Zakai. Was there a specific instance or something that happened that changed your mind?

RICK BARNES: Yeah, the way he guarded. Right off the bat, his defense. If you would have told me the first -- and, again, I'm still not so sure now. I would have told you that I think he is the best shooter on our team. Then every time I walk through our practice facility, whatever time of day when we were done, he was in there working. And we kept telling him some things he had to work on, and he is a tough guy. You know what, he is very smart. He knows how to handle me. He does. He knows when I get mad, he just walks by me like my wife does. You know, just -- yeah, say what you want to say, but I got it, which is smart. And I think that's part of leadership.

I think Josiah and Santi have told those guys, you know, Coach is going to tell you how he feels and don't take it personal. Just know that just listen to him. Sometimes I probably more in practice than in a game, I get emotional with them because I don't want to see mistake after mistake after mistake, and I can stop it. I can't during the game, but right off the bat, you knew he had the DNA that this guy is going to play.

Q. Does it matter to you being a two or a three seed, where you are regionally, and what about this team do you believe gives you a chance to make a deep run?

RICK BARNES: I can tell you, again, I said coming into this tournament, if any of the top four teams win the tournament, they should be on the one line. I said that. I think our league is the best in the country, so I learned a long time ago, you can talk. You're not going to politic for it because I can say what I want to say.

I just, again, want to compliment our league and, again, the way they do things as a league Commissioner Sankey, Dan Leibowitz, and what Mike Slive has done with our officials. This is the best basketball league in the country. It's hard for me to believe too -- and I get it, all the things, but when you go 9-9 in a league like this, it's hard for me not to think that we -- again, I have said on a good year, we should have seven teams in. On a great year, eight or

nine.

Again, I don't care who you play. There wasn't an easy game. You look at the job -- it will be a real mistake if Texas A&M is not in this tournament. I don't care about anything else because what they've done and the way they have played here at the end of the year and they deserve it, but again, 9-9 in this league, I'm just -- again, I'm partial to it, but wherever they put us, we'll go. Got to be ready to play, and again, just I'm happy for our guys, and we'll see what happens going forward. We have a new season starting again. We have to be ready.

Thank you, guys.

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