

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Tennessee Volunteers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Rick Barnes Josiah-Jordan James Santiago Vescovi

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 70, Ole Miss 55

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Tennessee. We'll ask Coach Barnes for some general thoughts on the game.

Coach Barnes.

RICK BARNES: Again, congratulations to Ole Miss for the job they've done the last couple weeks this season with the transition that happened there. I thought that staff did a terrific job of keeping those guys playing hard and connected, playing good basketball.

The start of this game they were relaxed and really making some shots. We got a little bit slow getting going. But I thought the second half we were able to pick our intensity up a little bit on the defensive end. We turned it over too much. We've got to take care of the ball better.

Overall, good first time out here in the tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Josiah, you had the shot on the first possession. Is that as good as you felt on the court this year?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I wouldn't say I feel any different right now. I just know the urgency we need to play with on both ends is necessary because it's tournament time, it's the best time of the year.

I just feel like not only me but my teammates, we know it's win or go home at this point.

Q. Josiah, how big do you think the last five minutes



of the first half was? Could you feel the momentum shift?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Yeah, I feel like we're more locked in the closing minutes of that half than we were for the start of the game. That's big for us. We talk about winning those four-minute games, coming into timeouts being up on the rebounds, being up in points. That was a good momentum shift for us going into halftime.

Q. It's easy to say just make more shots. When you guys are doing well offensively, what's going well?

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: First of all, I think when we're taking care of the ball, then at the same time we're moving all together, playing I'll call it smart, we're all connected, we're all on the same page, I think that's when we're at our best. Even if shots are not falling down, we have a lot of players that can attack the rim or shoot a three ball.

I think connecting both sides of the court, playing together and smart, I think that's when we're at our best.

Q. Josiah, some of those turnovers, especially the live ones there in the backcourt, were those communication breakdowns?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Yeah, just sloppiness, us being undisciplined. Like Coach said, for us to win the next game, we're going to have to be a lot more disciplined, get a lot smarter in the next 24 hours.

Q. Josiah, holding Ole Miss to 22 points in the second half, what went into the defensive efforts?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Like I said, I feel like we're at a point in the season where it's win or go home. We know that. The sense of urgency that we came out with defensively after halftime was big. We know we let them get too comfortable early on in the game. We just held each other accountable, and I feel like everybody came out and did their job to the best of their abilities.

Q. What needs to happen for you to have that from the start?



SANTIAGO VESCOVI: I think it starts with us, the older guys. We have to do a better job getting the guys ready, setting the tone from the first possession, not just waiting. Then just trying to get in rhythm as the game goes.

We know every single game is a fight. Every single game for us is a championship game. We know that every game we're going to have to fight from the start because that can bite you in the worst time.

Q. Josiah, is having your veterans play well something you talked about coming into the tournament?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: It's not been something that we talked about. I think it goes without saying that this team goes how the veterans go. We have to be a lot better for 40 minutes.

But, I mean, I'm just proud of those two guys and how they stepped up and how they stepped up all year.

Q. The way y'all sort of wear people down physically, is that something you can see when it's happening?

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: I think that just goes with the flow of the game. We're going to play the best defense that we can. We got to pick it up earlier. Other than that, I think it's just a matter of the game.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and continue with questions for Coach.

Q. What did you see being the difference in the defense in the first 15 minutes and the next 35?

RICK BARNES: Ball pressure. This time of year, often teams will try to get in a possession game. They weren't looking to really push the ball after made baskets. Sometimes on misses, they did hit us when we turned it over hard.

They had, what, 19 points off turnovers. I thought the second half, Uros and Jahmai were the ones that brought the aggression. I thought when we started changing a little bit with our ball screen, I thought Uros did a really good job. Started doubling a little bit, more hard help, doing things like that.

Went with a small lineup, started switching everything. We didn't want them to get the spot-up threes. But I think the zone helped us early. I think the zone probably broke a little bit of rhythm. They were in a pretty good rhythm to start the game.

But they've been good. I mean, you go back and look at their games over the last couple weeks, they've been in every basketball game. But I thought the zone helped us break a little rhythm, then we came out more aggressive I thought, better ball pressure, better ball screen coverage in the second half.

Q. How important is it that your seniors at this time of year show up and deliver?

RICK BARNES: They have to. I mean, Jo is right, it's on them to do it. With all that we've been through this year, they've seen it. Different games we have the games take on different personalities. We've found a way to do it.

We've got to defend. We did in the second half. I thought we got back to being more physical, getting out and getting through passing lanes. Santi, again, did a great job with what he does, just trying to disrupt offenses.

Our seniors, this time of year, it should be their time of year.

Q. Alabama has been a national story this year on and off the court. At Tennessee, do you guys have a gun policy on your team?

RICK BARNES: University has a Code of Conduct policy. No weapons allowed on campus. But as a team, that is our rule, too, no one on the team. Two things that we have. One of them is that you can never, ever do anything domestically against a female. You can never carry a firearm as a team rule. But the university also has that policy in place.

Q. With the turnovers, how much of that is just naturally going to happen as y'all adjust to playing without Zakai? How much of that is fixable?

RICK BARNES: It's all fixable. Some of the ones we had were ridiculous, to be quite frank. Baffled by some of them.

It's fixable. You look at them, I mean, sometimes you got to give the other team credit for turning you over. But when you're throwing the ball in a passing lane when you know someone's being denied, those are all fixable if you understand the value of the ball. Jo used the word 'disciplined' enough to take care of the basketball.

Q. How confident are you feeling in the offense this time of year? Do you feel like you still have a complete performance out there that you haven't shown yet?

RICK BARNES: I think we can still get better. I mean, defensively I want to see us play defense, rebound. From our point, when we go back and grade this game out, I'm sure we've hit a lot of our team goals that we would like to have obviously.

But offensively, I mean, you think about it. Again, 19 points off turnovers. That can't happen. I mean, if we're the defensive team that we want to be and should be, we've got to make people play against it. You can't give 'em the ball and give 'em a chance to get out in transition. There's no defense for that. The best defense we can have right there is take care of the ball.

For us moving forward, the best defense we can have is taking care of the ball, not allow people get out and score 19 points in transition.

Q. You spoke to your defense, last time you met these Missouri Tigers, they puts up 86, with 24 hours to prepare. What is your mindset?

RICK BARNES: Same what we do during tournament play. We all start the season out, we pretty much go on one-day preps. The way we do it, got a ballroom, do what we always do, watch tape, scout, the game is being scouted. We'll get the guys in there and go from there.

Q. From where you were watching, was it just lack of sharpness on some of the turnovers, focus? Guys zigging when other guys were zagging?

RICK BARNES: That's a good term. Some were zigging, some were zagging. That's the best way I can tell you.

We had a back screen, beach ball kind of pass. The ones out front, I mean, there's no defense for that. Those are careless turnovers. Again, Jo used the term 'disciplined'. I think that's the right word.

And understanding the value of the ball this time of the year. Early in the year you would expect that. Some of the ones we had tonight you can't have, especially from older players, this time of year.

Q. Back to the Missouri game. I think 73 of their points were from their backcourt. What has to change specifically on the perimeter? How difficult is that?

RICK BARNES: They played a great game. There's no doubt. They played well against us. Again, we got back in it. They made a great shot at the end to beat us. A tough shot. They did it.

We'll need everybody. Again, a game like this, they play

defense different. One of the best teams in the country at turning you over, getting steals.

Again, it's understanding taking care of the basketball. It's going to be really important. Not let 'em get out in transition with turnovers. Then obviously, their guards get going downhill, they drive the ball hard. They're going to make you pay if you turn it over. That's what I can tell you.

But I tell you, I think most good teams do do that.

Q. You talked about Uros being responsible for the defensive intensity the second half. How was he able to do that? How important is that going forward?

RICK BARNES: It is. I mean, his length, obviously. He understands. He's a guy that does a good job with pressure release on offense. But defensively inside, physicality in there, not giving deep post-up position. Rebounding the ball. He made the effort there.

Really the fact that he was getting away from the basket, not just laying back, but he exerted himself on some ball screen situations, which I thought was really good because, again, it kept them out of rhythm coming off some of their ball screen actions.

Thank you, guys.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports