

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 10, 2023

Tennessee Volunteers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Rick Barnes

Olivier Nkamhoua

Jahmai Mashack

Postgame Press Conference



Missouri 79, Tennessee 71

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with Tennessee. We'll ask Coach Barnes for general thoughts, then take questions.

Coach Barnes.

RICK BARNES: Hard-fought game both ways. I thought both teams really put a lot of effort and energy into it. They played a terrific second half, shot the ball well. They really hit some big shots at the right time.

I think our guys, again, we're still learning how to play without Zakai. I thought that showed up in the fact when they had a couple runouts where we didn't have the floor balance.

Give them credit. I'm really proud of the effort our guys put into this game. I thought they all fought hard to get ready to play. Again, Missouri made some really key buckets at the right time. We needed to get a couple stops there at the end, and we didn't finish the play.

We gave up a dribble penetration layup. With nine seconds, that was a tough play. We were in a situation where we were scrambling. Ball came off, they were able to get that one back.

Really proud of the effort of our guys, again. I'm proud of the fact that they're learning. I think these last three games are going to help us going forward. I know what we set out to accomplish is still out there in front of us. We just got to get back and get ready to go again.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. What do you have to do to be better in the closing minutes of games?

OLIVIER NKAMHOUA: I think it goes with knowing our shot selections, offensive end taking care of the ball, executing what we need to do, especially coming out of timeouts, playing together.

On defense we play with a very high intensity, we attack other teams. Sometimes we can get a little overaggressive at times, overrun plays. We need to find a way to stay under control while keeping that same intensity.

Q. Jahmai, what was the difference in the defense in the first and second half?

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think we knew going into the game they were going to make shots. This team, you can only go by off of what they played against us the first time. We were ready and we were prepared for that.

But I think all in all, we just had to close out the game a little bit better on the defensive end. We gave up, like O said, too many drives. They hit threes, they're going to hit threes, but we can't give up those drive layups and we have to finish the game with a rebound.

I think we were prepared. I know our coaches did a great job with scouting them. They gave us the keys. But we just have to finish the game as players. We got to grow from it.

Q. Jahmai, what did this weekend do for your confidence? How do you feel in the new role?

JAHMAI MASHACK: I feel like my confidence is still the same. I feel like I'm a very confident player. I know I work extremely hard on my game. It doesn't really matter if we don't come out with the win.

I know I have to be better on both ends. I think I got to be better defensively and offensively. I know I can be just to help our team out.



My confidence is going to grow once we keep getting wins.

Q. Olivier, Rick mentions he thinks these last three games are going to help you all. How do you see these last three games helping you starting next weekend?

OLIVIER NKAMHOUA: I think it's true. Playing in these kind of tough games, close games, intense games, is always going to be good for us in the long run because that's tournament basketball, that's March Madness. Honestly, not even the last three, we've been in games like this all year and we've come out in top in games like this and we've lost games like this.

I think all of that is going to be valuable experience for us going into these next games.

Q. Jahmai, basketball is a game where you lose close games sometimes. Y'all have had several of those this year. How do you not let things like that affect you?

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think for us, man, we've gone through so much this season just internally as a team. I think despite even the losses, we've grown so much with staying together and dealing with adversity, man.

Basketball sometimes is just like that. We got to bounce back from it. But I think this tournament, these losses, these close games, it's just building our mental fortitude and helping us out dealing with close ones in the tournament.

I think we're all going to be ready for that. We've gone through so much that mental toughness has really gone up in individuals and as a team together.

I think we're going to be prepared for anything and everything going into March, going into the tournament.

Q. Jahmai, what do you see from them coming out of timeouts? What allowed them to have so much success there?

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think they were just hitting shots. They were executing what they wanted to get to. They were taking care of taking advantage of matchups they wanted to get to.

Us as a team, we pride ourself it is on being able to switch and guard the ball. We have to be able to continue to do that a little bit better.

They executed well. They knew exactly which spots they wanted to get to. They're a confident team. They know

what they're good at, they know what they're not good at.

I think coming out of timeouts, they did a great job of executing. But what we do is we take that and we disrupt that. I think we did that at points in time in the game, but we've just got to do that for 40 minutes and really be dogs out there on the court.

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

Q. You guys have been a very good defensive team this year. Talk about the two games against Missouri, what's been challenging. Kobe Brown, what he did today, how he performed.

RICK BARNES: Well, again, I mean, they obviously went to an isolation game trying to get him in there. We actually went small one time and came out of the timeout, coaches had a play we thought they would run, we switched when we shouldn't have on one particular play where he scored in there.

We knew, again, they were going to go to that at some point. That's what they do. They made some key shots at the right time. Got to give them credit for that.

It's like Jahmai said, we talked about it. It's the layups where we didn't have the basket, the floor balance. We're going to learn from that. Again, someone asked a question about the last four minutes. We played the entire year with Zakai Zeigler. We got to get better at the floor balance at the end.

Again, their three key guys did a great job. You've got to give them credit for it.

Q. What is this team's identity right now as far as you see it going into the NCAA tournament?

RICK BARNES: I don't know what happened at the start of the game. I wasn't really happy the way we started the game. I don't know what that was about.

After that we settled down. Again, I know we can guard. They made some shots today. You got to give them credit for that. But the fact is, we, again, three games without Zakai, obviously the one we played at home was a really good win for us, or is it four games, but anyway, we're going to be fine.

The biggest prize that we want to go after is still out there. Jahmai mentioned it. This team has been very resilient. I told you guys I don't know if I've been through in all my years in coaching what we've gone through with the

injuries this year. Right when you think you're getting it all back, it doesn't happen.

But these guys, great attitude, great work ethic. Again, as a coach, I couldn't ask for any more from these guys because they really do want to win.

Again, we got a chance. I'm telling you, I think we've got as much a chance as anybody. If you ask me what I'm thinking of right now, one word it would be this team has been very resilient. There's a lot of teams that would like to be where we are right now. There's a lot of teams that won't look forward to a matchup with us.

We're going to learn from this game, as we did the last couple, and we'll be ready next week.

Q. Down the stretch, Josiah comes out. He's having a tough offensive day. That is what the decision came down to not playing him down the stretch?

RICK BARNES: We felt like coming down the stretch, the fact that Tyreke was shooting the ball well, too, we had to make sure we kept offense on the court.

Again, to be quite honest, we think with our length now we can guard some of it. But we gave up a drive out of a side ball screen that was a tough play right there.

Again, we just felt like because Tyreke had been shooting the ball well, we had to get him back out there.

Q. Are you concerned at all with the team's confidence down the stretch?

RICK BARNES: No. I think they'll learn from it. Again, they stepped back and made a couple threes. Olivier, he had a great look at a three. Again, Olivier can shoot the ball. That shot goes in...

Again, it's the little small plays that add up, again, that we've got to eliminate. Teams can make some threes, but you can't give up the little ones at the rim. You can't give up dribble penetration.

The last one on the offensive rebound was a broken scramble situation. I'm not sure exactly what happened. Two guys went at it right there to get to the ball. I'm not sure.

I mean, it's a really fine line. But, again, I think our guys are confident. I really do. I can only tell you, I've been around them, I know their body languages, and it was not a lack of confidence.

Q. About your team in the four games without Zakai?

RICK BARNES: Again, we're still searching for that. We played however many games we played, the last four, five minutes of the game, we played through him most of the time. We did a lot of ball screen situations late in the game with him, different things. We're not doing that as much right now.

That's where we probably miss him the most. But we're not going to use that as an excuse in any of these games. If you ask me, the last four minutes of the game is where I thought as a coach and our staff that that's where we would probably find out we're going to have to figure out what we're going to do.

Again, we've gotten better with it. I still go back, we had three bad offensive plays at Auburn, then today we had a couple defensive plays that we've got to clean up.

We certainly played well enough today offensively to win the game. There's no question about that. They shot the ball. Again, you got to give them credit for that. We gave them too much in certain situations that we can't give up.

Q. The front court scoring, the lack of it, how damaging was that today?

RICK BARNES: Again, we talk about it all year. That's where we've been inconsistent. We got to be consistent there. We need it. But also defensively. It's just consistency.

Often when that's happening, it puts a lot of pressure on our perimeter guys. They did a great job today. I mean, it's amazing how people go after sanity, and he just continues to do what he does night in, night out.

We knew this year that would be the biggest area with our team, can our post guys consistently know what we're going to get night in, night out.

Again, if we can ever get them all playing at the level we know they're capable of, that's when we can become a dangerous team.

Q. How would you assess the strength this year and the depth of the strength this year of this league?

RICK BARNES: I think it's really good. Obviously, you might could go back and say there's years when there's been more talented players, something like that.

In terms of top to bottom with talent, depth, there's been no easy games. Again, there hasn't. There hasn't been any

easy ones. Certainly Alabama has had a great year. They've had some great wins on the road.

I look around college basketball, I think it's a lot like our league this year. I don't know there's a clear-cut somebody's going to catch it at the right time. I think the same thing about our league. On any given night, you knew whenever you went to play, it was going to be hard.

It's only going to get better with Texas and Oklahoma coming in the league. We already have the best athletic conference in America. It's only going to continue to grow and get better in everything.

But this was a year, the eight years I've been in the league, again, every game it seems like has been a grind.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

RICK BARNES: Thank you, guys.

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