

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 15, 2024

Tennessee Volunteers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Rick Barnes

Jamai Mashack

Zakai Zeigler

Postgame Press Conference

Mississippi State 73, Tennessee 56

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Tennessee. We'll ask Coach Barnes for a couple thoughts on the game.

Coach.

RICK BARNES: Congratulations to Mississippi State. I thought from the get-go they came out and their plan was really to be aggressive, drive the ball, obviously play inside. We got away from really our defense being in gaps, trying to shrink the court. That's how we play. But we got away from that.

I thought, again, give them credit, offensively that we started missing shots and we let that carry over to the defensive end. We got down. It snowballed on us. We didn't do a very good job of staying to our game plan. I think Coach Jans did a great job of executing their game plan.

Again, congratulations to them. They dominated the game in any way they wanted to.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Jahmai, what do you feel went wrong for you to start the game?

JAHMAI MASHACK: Defense. I feel like defense. That's how you're going to lose games. Offensively... You can control defense, you can always control defense. Like they always done, whether they lose or win, they're going to stick with what they do. They didn't change whether it was the first time we played them or now. They did what they



always do. They weren't trying to do anything. They weren't trying to do anything they don't always do.

With us, we just got to settle down and play good defense. I think that will get us in transition, get us some easy looks. We're a good team when we're out and running. If we're not getting our defense there, our offense is just going to go downhill from there. I think that's exactly what happened. That's all you can say is defensively we weren't locked in, especially in the first half.

Q. Zakai, how do you keep this from becoming something worse? How do you turn this into something that can help you down the road?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: When we go watch the film, we can't take anything personal. Everything that we see on that film, film don't lie. We just got to take it to heart and know if we go out there and do that again, it's going to be the end of the season. So we got to know what's at cost.

Q. Jahmai, any level of concern going into March Madness with a losing streak?

JAHMAI MASHACK: Absolutely not. Whatever it is we were doing, we're going to get that fixed for sure. I think we've shown it this whole seen, that we're a team with resilience. I think games like this just build toughness for us.

But guarantee that we are going to go back, we're going to look at whatever we need to look at. We're going to look at what we have to do ourselves and as a team and we're not going to go through what we went through today.

It starts with the seniors, with me and Zakai, the guys that have been in that tournament. There's no second chances from there. Whatever we need to fix, we're going to get it fixed. We're going to go from there and have ourselves a great March Madness.

Q. Zakai, y'all have had games this season where things don't go right, you get in a deep hole. Until today y'all usually came back and made those games interesting or won them. Why didn't that happen



today?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Just wasn't ourself. We can't let that happen again. Simple as that.

Q. You mentioned defense, trying to get out in transition. When shots aren't falling, how much does that affect defense?

JAHMAI MASHACK: It shouldn't at all. It shouldn't. Defense is the one thing that you can control. You can control defense. You can control rebounding. If you can control those two things, whether your shots are falling or not, you're getting stops on the other end. You're going to make layups, wide-open layups. That's what you get in transition.

In no way, shape or form should making or missing shots affect our defense. I think that has a lot to do with what went on in this game. I think it got to our heads. That can't happen in basketball, man. You can't be perfect.

But defense, you can do whatever you can to get them stopping from scoring the ball.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, Jahmai hit it spot on. Can't let that happen, and that definitely happened today.

Q. Jahmai, you pride yourself on the toughness and physicality when it's not going well. Do you feel you had the proper response? How do you make sure you do next week?

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think me personally, it's really hard to be that team that goes down and is always known for we're going to get back up. I think we have to lose that and start with the team that starts off like that. That can't be us. We can't be that team that is like, We're going to give them the first half, the second half... No, that can't happen.

To be the team we want to be, that starts in the first half. If you're applying or not, you have to have energy, come in like we're the underdog. That's the mindset, that's going at that point the rest of the season, we're the underdogs. No matter what. I don't care what seed we're playing, we're going to be the underdogs, play like the underdogs. We're going to come back from the jump playing defense and rebounding.

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

Q. Just what were they able to do defensively to make it so tough on you guys?

RICK BARNES: Well, they were switching. They're a very good defensive team. We've seen nothing they did today that we haven't seen. We really haven't.

Again, this time of year, as you get late into the season, we all know each other well. But you have to work extremely hard offensively to get open, get your guys passing the ball. It's important.

We had a couple possessions where we ran what we wanted but the pass wasn't delivered where it needed to be, allowed the defense to catch up. We didn't screen on a couple sets we ran, where they really came through the route we were trying to run untouched.

And you have to take care of the details offensively. We didn't do a very good job of doing that.

They're a good defensive team. Chris does a great job with his team. But I thought Jahmai hit it, it's pretty much what I said at halftime, we allowed our lack of defensive alertness, intensity, sticking to the game plan to roll over into what I thought went on on the offensive end.

Q. One of the players mentioned Mississippi State was just the more desperate team today. What is a trait you're looking for in your team's response, desperation or otherwise?

RICK BARNES: Well, I told them, I said, Let's just sit here and think about how we feel right now. Let's just talk about it, sit here and marinate in how you feel right now. If you feel like this again, it's over. I want you to not forget right now what you did. This time of year you want to give it your best.

Shack used the term 'underdog'. I don't know if 'underdog' is the right term. You have to understand how hard it is to win this time of year. If you want to be a team that can play through three days and win a conference tournament, through six days and win a national championship, there's got to be somewhat of a desperate mindset that every possession matters.

But we didn't play with that type of mentality today. Really the first 20 minutes, I haven't seen that team all year, even including practice. I'm sitting there watching it like, Man, maybe it might be good to get this out of our system. We haven't had one like this where we didn't respond better. I thought we got impatient, lost our poise, fouling with six seconds on the shot clock, trying to steal the ball when giving up position.

Like Shack said, offensively we have won games where we haven't been good on offense, but our defense has kept it

in it. Our defense did not help us at all today.

Q. Do you feel like there's any commonality in what Mississippi State exposed in both games this year?

RICK BARNES: Well, the one thing that they did, the physicality inside. I think one thing good today was J.P. I told the coaches we probably should have put him out there sooner because he's the one guy that can guard post guys. Matthews had a great day today. He drove us, went by us.

So much of that was not taking care of the details of the scouting report. Again, as you know, our coaches do a great job with the scout. To continue to let him get to his right hand and where he wanted to go. Even at the end of the game when we had really a pretty good possession, trying to double-team to get him to play quicker, and getting driven by in the last four or five seconds, you can't give up those straight-line drives.

We did not do a good job one-on-one defense. But there's other teams that have played us the way they played us. They made up their mind they're going to drive the ball at us. We've seen that all year with teams doing that.

Again, we just got really spaced out. Why? I can't tell you. We harped on it so much. Every loss we've had this year, that's been the case, where we have gotten away from our defensive principles and allowed teams to do what they wanted to do. We didn't have an answer for it.

Q. So much gets made about this time of year, having success this time of year. Do you worry a performance like this at this moment for these guys and this team could get in their head a little bit, put too much pressure on themselves?

RICK BARNES: I talked about that, too. I've said I've had teams many years that I've been blessed to do this, playing well at the end of the year, didn't do well in the NCAA tournament. I've had a couple teams that were limping a little bit, ended up having great runs.

We are who we are right now. Like Jahmai said, like we talked back there, we've got a week or so to fix it and go back. Like he said, we do what we always do. We have a system that we believe in. We have to scrub it out, look at it. It will go back to a mindset. That's what I spent a lot of time talking to our team about, our mindset. Where is it? Where was it? Why was it like this today? Was it preparation different? It was. We're an experienced team.

We didn't know who we were going to play until, what, 3:00 yesterday. We had already practiced. Everything we did,

we walked through. That's not an excuse because you would have done that today. We wouldn't be going in the gym to do what we normally do leading up to it.

With that said, our older guys who we count on to get us going, they struggled in a big way today. We just got to get back to being who I know we are and who I think they know we can be.

Q. You worry about going from an uncharacteristic performance back to whatever the character of this team is in a week's time?

RICK BARNES: Yeah, I wouldn't be truthful -- I'm concerned. I don't know if I'd say 'worried', but I'm always concerned about where we are, our mindset, what we're thinking.

Like I said, I've been doing it long enough to know I wish I had a crystal ball and look into it, know exactly.

All we can do, like I said, we have a program, we have a system we believe in. Win or lose, we got to do what we do, get prepared to play someone next week, whoever that might be, go from there.

Q. Are you concerned about some guys passing up open looks right now?

RICK BARNES: Yes, absolutely. That's what we've talked about. Again, whether people think they're putting it all on Dalton. But he's got to do a better job with his shot selection. I think more of it has been put on Z, to be honest with you. Everything ends up to be like an avalanche hitting him because he's so competitive. Obviously they're going to game plan for Dalton. Because of that, some other guys are going to get opportunities and they have to shoot the ball.

Early in the year, when we were turning the ball over, it's because we were turning down shots, trying to do other things. Normally we get a high volume of quality shots. You got to take the shots. You got to take 'em. If we do that, most of the time we have the floor spaced the correct way where we can rebound the ball, get some offensive stick-backs. When shots get turned down, guys start driving, what's next, it leaves the floor unbalanced and we don't get what we need to off the offensive glass.

Q. You said you weren't sure about the mindset to start. Several guys in the locker room said that. Could you feel that coming into the game? Was it a surprise? How confident are you in what team will show up next week?

RICK BARNES: I thought what we did leading into this was good. Our rhythm gets broken a little bit. The season is over with, then you have a longer week. This is the longest time we had off since our open week.

I will say this. We did not respond well after our open date. I don't think we played well. I told the team that, leading into that game. I trust these guys. I've been with them. I know how hard they work. I know how much it means to them to be a good team. I know they believe in each other. I think they'll hold each other accountable, like Shack said.

I go into every game thinking we're going to win if we do what we're capable of doing. We didn't. I don't want to sound like I'm taking away from Chris and his team. I thought they did a great job and they deserved to win the game. They outplayed us the entire time. He's a terrific coach.

From our standpoint, we're not happy with a lot of things that happened today, things that shouldn't have happened. There's nothing that did happen that we can't fix.

Q. Some of those older guys, anything you can say to them that hasn't been said yet about trying to figure out what's going on there offensively?

RICK BARNES: Well, we do a lot of different things. We go back, put together a video of them playing well, making shots. We're going to do it all.

I think the biggest thing, is again, what we've always done. We'll watch the tape. Again, the tape is going to point out everything that we've talked about. Like I said, there's nothing that they did that we can't fix, that we haven't had to fix before.

Understand that there's no more fixing. It's done. You got to get it done right now. You can't look back and think, again, the question about a mindset. I thought we'd be ready to play based on how we prepared coming in here.

I know how bad Z wanted to play well because he wasn't a part of this tournament last year. Still, this is all new to Dalton. Today I thought he played like it. He's got to understand how he's going to figure out ways to impact the game when he's not making shots, other people are playing him. One of them is simply running the court hard, pulling people with him.

The key is that we've all got to be honest, myself, look at it and see what I didn't think we did or I did well, what our staff didn't do to get ready, because we have to avoid it somehow, somehow.

I have all the confidence that these guys will figure it out, because they have all year. We'll go back and learn from it and get ready for next week.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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