

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 14, 2025

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes Zakai Zeigler Chaz Lanier

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 83, Texas 72

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Tennessee. We'll ask Coach Barnes for a couple of general thoughts on the game, then take questions.

RICK BARNES: First, utmost respect for the University of Texas and Rodney and his staff. I think this was the fifth or sixth game where they had their whole team intact trying to play. They came in here in a very tough situation. To me there's no doubt there's an NCAA team, the fact that he came in here and got 'em playing the way they were.

For us, we were obviously very concerned about the game because the staffs know each other so well. Again, great respect for the University of Texas and that basketball program.

Proud of our guys. We knew it was going to be tough early. Jahmai Mashack was a guy that I thought defensively set a great tone for us trying to guard Tre Johnson. He's a terrific player. That and early Chaz got going.

But overall good team win for us. It was hard-fought.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Chaz, is it just home cooking being back in Nashville? What got you going?

CHAZ LANIER: It was just the mentality coming into the game. I know what my team needs from me. It has to be aggressive for the whole 40 minutes. That's what coach has been preaching to me all long. Just be aggressive for the whole 40 minutes.



Q. Zakai, obviously last year when you were in this tournament, didn't go that great. Was that motivation for you to have a little bit better showing?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, definitely. Last year we came into this tournament, first game we wasn't ourself. We really got out-toughed. Coming into this game, we knew if we was going to lose the game, it wasn't because we got bullied or out-toughed.

The guys that were on the team last year, we went through it, and we was preaching to everybody because Barnes was preaching it to us a lot. I feel like we went out there and played a tough game.

Q. Chaz, it looked like early on you'd kind of got going. After a timeout, I think you maybe only got one or two shots off. Did Texas do anything differently coming out of that timeout?

CHAZ LANIER: Yeah, I think they started guarding me a little bit different. They were really denying me the ball. We also saw some mismatches that we wanted to attack. The coaches did a great job pointing that out.

That was our game plan. We saw some mismatches.

Q. The SEC is such a powerhouse this year. Big matchup tomorrow. How do you deal with that spotlight before March Madness even gets going?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I feel like we've been in the spotlight the whole year. I feel like the guys, we've always done a really good job of dealing with it, understanding this is a three-day tournament for us. We won a tough game today. We got 30 minutes, celebrate it, on to the next one.

We pretty much have to have a short-term memory with this. I feel like we've all been in the spotlight at some point all throughout the entire season. I don't feel it's going to be anything that's too bright for us or anything like that.

Q. Zakai, with Auburn tomorrow, what do you think is



going to have to happen for you to come out on top?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Just go out there, everybody do our jobs. Auburn, they're a really good team. We faced them early this season. They're a really good team.

If we go out there, every person does our job, we go out there and be ourselves, it's going to be a really tough game. We do that, we're going to be able to come out on top.

Q. Sore subject, but the free throws recently. Y'all historically have been good free-throw shooters. Anything going on there? Just try not to think about it?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: For Coach Barnes (smiling)?

Coach Barnes just kept on talking to me for some reason every time I was at the free-throw line. It was kind of distracting me. I don't really hear the crowd, but I hear him a lot. He was just taking me off my game (smiling).

No, but I just got to focus more and make my free throws. I know I'm a good free-throw shooter. Everybody on the team is a good free-throw shooter. We just got to step up and knock 'em down.

CHAZ LANIER: We just know we have to be better. That's what the team needs, so we're going to get it done, practice on it.

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

Q. You expect a similar type of game from the first Georgia around with Auburn?

RICK BARNES: I don't know. Still takes a bit of time to wind down from this one.

Great respect for Bruce. Again, you go through this season, only lose two games in this league, the way it's played out from start to finish with non-league, what the conference play was like. It will just take a gigantic effort with everybody, like Zakai said, being locked in. They've got a 10-deep team, old team, experienced team, a team that's been here and won it.

They have Player of the Year in Johni Broome. They have a lot of pieces. We'll have to be on top of our game.

Q. We've asked you about this a lot, but playing against Rodney, you got a lot of connections in this game, are these kind of games not fun in that sense?

RICK BARNES: They're not. They're really not. I can tell you through the years we've tried not to ever schedule the guys that we have connection with, like with Rodney and Frank and Rob Lanier, Mike Schwartz now, Kim English.

It's tough, because you know what, we won a lot of games at Texas. Those guys were a huge, huge part of it. I look at them this year. I mean, coming into a new league, had to be an adjustment for them and Oklahoma. The fact that both of those teams at the end of the year playing high-level basketball. I know Rodney this year struggled with some injuries, trying to work in a super talent like he has in Tre Johnson is tough.

Both games were hard-fought games. Really a couple possessions here or there. But yes, it's always hard to play against really you feel like you're playing against your family and it's tough.

Q. With Chaz, it's probably too simplistic to say he's replaced Dalton. He kind of stepped into that role as a transfer. How do you feel like Chaz has handled that this season in terms of what he's been asked to do?

RICK BARNES: Again, great. Again, we didn't talk about him replacing Dalton. We talked about what we needed from him.

The utmost respect for Chaz because he had a chance to go other places, probably do a little bit better NIL-wise. He decided he wants to stay home. He wanted to play in front of -- be in his home state.

He's very unselfish, very unselfish player. I will say this to you. The difference in the two would be I never had to Dell Dalton to shoot. I beg Chaz to shoot sometimes because he's so conscientious of wanting to be a part of it.

I think what's helped him as much as any is we kind of had another guy to step into the role is Jordan Gainey. Both those guys made it tough, we get those guys on the flanks out there. Pretty hard to guard.

Defensively Chaz has really done a good job buying in on that end. For a guy that, again, one year here, he's very confident in who he is, but he's a very, very unselfish basketball player. Sometimes to a fault.

I don't think any point in time I've compared him to Dalton when we're talking one on one. I'm always comparing those guys to where they want to get at the highest level.

Again, he's just been a great fit for us. He came in like Dalton with the idea that he wanted to be part of a winning



game, winning team and wanted to get to the NCAA tournament. He's gotten better in the last two weeks. I thought he did a great job today moving without the ball. He's learned how to set his man up better. He spent a lot of time the last two and a half, three weeks, did it earlier, but even more so learning to adjust in ways being guarded, grabbed and stuff.

He's worked hard. Learned how to make two, three, four cuts, keep himself moving, harder to guard. When he's open, he's got to shoot it. When he's hitting it, it just lights a fire I think under everybody.

Q. Y'all had a few days off. They were on their third game in three days. Did you try to take advantage of that with any more tempo? How much does Texas look like an NCAA tournament team to you?

RICK BARNES: Well, I'll answer the second part first. There's no doubt Texas is an NCAA team. There's so many teams in our league that would win conferences. There's no doubt in my mind that they did enough coming in. They have. Being on the bubble, whatever people want to talk about. I think they've done more than enough. I think we should have 14 teams in the NCAA tournament is what I think.

What's the first part of the question?

Q. Few days' rest...

RICK BARNES: You worry about it. Again, people try to get analytical about do you want to go and win it. Last year we came here and we were pathetic. We didn't come to play. We played against a team that was angry, needed to win. We got embarrassed.

You go back to Texas, playing two games. Yeah, we want to play fast anyway. They do a lot of good things. We felt like they would probably try to get it into a little bit more of a tempo game, which they kind of did that.

We gave them too many points when we played in Austin earlier in the year in transition. We felt like we really had to do a job on Tre Johnson. The biggest thing was we were going to try to make him really guard. We weren't going to let him hang out and use all his energy on the offensive end.

We really took some days off ourself because we have guys like everybody this time of year with some things they need to try to get healed up. You come here with the idea that you really do want to win the tournament, regardless of what pundits say about it.

The only thing I can tell you you don't want to do is win the tournament, play early on Thursday. That's the only thing you don't want to do. Otherwise there's not a player, coach that when they toss it up that doesn't want to win every game they play.

Q. As you get ready for Auburn tomorrow, how much do you look back when you played or do you look at the Auburn team for the last few weeks?

RICK BARNES: Both. We'll look back and take some things from the game obviously. What's ironic, 10 years ago during this tournament, Tennessee and Auburn were in the playing-in game. Since that 10 years, I would think that we know each other pretty well (smiling). Obviously, both teams have grown.

But we'll look back obviously at our last game with them. Seems like forever ago. I do think they're better. I think we're better. We have the utmost respect for them and I think they do for us.

Q. Sometimes there can be concern with the first game of the post-season, how your team is going to come out. For Chaz to start the way he did, how nice is it to have veterans who will set your post-season tone the way they did?

RICK BARNES: It is. We started talking about it a couple weeks ago. We go into the South Carolina game and we're approaching this like the first round of the NCAA tournament. I want to get it on their mindset now. This is an NCAA tournament-type game.

We talk about it. I want them to feel a little bit of what everybody feels in March. I thought Chaz was really focused in practice. Again, we didn't do a lot. We'd do our routine, but we were like yesterday on the court for 45 minutes. Monday we did very little. Tuesday off. Wednesday we practiced hour and 15 hard. We always practice hard.

I thought Chaz' focus the whole week has been good. Again, when you talk about Zakai, he mentioned it, he and Shaq and Jordan last year, we walked in here and we were awful. Yesterday they gathered up after we had practice, they reminded those guys that we're not going to come out and play like that. We got out-toughed a year ago. You heard Zakai say. If we lose, it's not going to be because we didn't put the effort in, because we didn't last year.

We were lucky that we were able to have an NCAA tournament afterwards. I think winning is a habit and I think losing is a habit. The mindset is something, the routine that we're in, we try to stay in it, but we try to talk



about everything we know they're hearing out there anyway.

Jahmai was awesome today. He was the MVP in the game. When you have to guard one of the best players in the country, if I look at it, I think he even outscored him, which is unusual. We don't count on him to do a lot of that. He's getting fouled early, making his free throws.

He was outstanding in every way today. I thought it set a great tone for us.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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