

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 15, 2025

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes Jordan Gainey Zakai Zeigler

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 70, Auburn 65

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Tennessee. We'll ask Coach Barnes for a couple comments on the game, then take questions.

RICK BARNES: I said it yesterday. Same thing applies today. Incredible respect for Bruce and Auburn and the job he's done there, the year that they've had.

I thought today both teams played their hearts out. It was a high-level, hard-fought game both ways. We made a run early. I don't think in anybody's mind they were going to make a run to get back. They're an excellent team at pressuring to get the ball in in late-game situations.

We just kept talking to our guys they're going to have to make some plays, work to get open, have to get the ball in.

I thought Zakai was awesome during timeouts today. I thought the way they were connected. We had some blunders we can't make when they made their run. The timeout. I was really encouraged. Guys were saying, Just take a breath here, settle down. Zakai said we're going to do this on this possession, next possession this, next possession this. It went pretty much the way he described it.

Really a great team effort from our guys today. Proud of every one of them. Again, just a high-level, hard-fought game.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Zakai, you were 25 of 27 from the free-throw line as a team. Talk about the importance of being able to ice**



**free throws.**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yesterday we missed a lot of free throws down the stretch. Especially from some guys, like myself, that should be making 'em. Today we knew we had to come in. We went to that free-throw line, take our time, but we know we was going to make the shot.

I felt like we were laser focused every time we was on that free-throw line.

**Q. Jordan, final 10 minutes, could you talk about the mental toughness of you guys. Seemed like you asserted yourself. What was the talk amongst the team in that segment?**

JORDAN GAINNEY: Definitely. Every timeout we were talking, stay the course, calm down, do what we do. We made a few mistakes down the stretch, but we all stayed calm in the moment, made sure we got to the next play, did what we had to do.

**Q. Zakai, have you ever celebrated a defensive rebound as much as you did the one Felix got?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, I knew that was a really big rebound. I probably celebrated a little bit more when JG came up with another rebound and they fouled him.

In that huddle right before, I remember was 64-62, we said this would have been a really big stop, got to get a stop right here. Felix had a great defensive play, came up with the rebound. I feel that was a huge play, almost like a game-changing play during that game. It was physically and mentally tough to get up there and do exactly what we said we were going to do.

**Q. You've been tested a lot this year against great teams. What is the biggest thing you take and keep building off of from these matchups?**

JORDAN GAINNEY: Really just our preparation and then how we go through certain situations throughout the game. Today we had two turnovers back to back. The way we

**ASAP** sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

responded was really good. We didn't seem fazed, came to the timeout, no one was panicking or flustered or anything. It's okay, we're good, let's get a stop and we'll get back on offense and do what we have to do.

**Q. Zakai, how big were the minutes you got from D Stone today?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Amazing. Coach Barnes has been preaching to him, you got to do your job, rebound, come in and play defense. His energy was great. On offense he spreads the floor out. The way he fought, played defense, it was amazing. His minutes was great for us.

**Q. Jordan, you take so much pride in your defense. Is it kind of fitting that the final two, three minutes of this game required you to come up with those stops and rebounds?**

JORDAN GAINEY: Yes, for sure, because we know every single game is going to come down to the wire, down to the last two minutes. Really locking in on every possession, because every possession is key. We hang our hats on defense. We have to rebound the ball to make a great defensive stop, and that's what we did.

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

**Q. With tournament selection likely happening as we speak, do you have a message for the committee about this Tennessee squad, the effort they gave today, how it should be factored in?**

RICK BARNES: I don't think they're listening, you know? I think they're sequestered somewhere (smiling).

I think we let our body of work speak for it. Again, I look at our league. I'll say it. I'll be disappointed if we don't have 14 teams in the NCAA tournament. I think it's obvious that Auburn and Florida have played themselves into a 1 seed, which they should.

I don't know. Again, I don't think they listen. I do trust 'em. I think where we are in today's game, they're going to do the best job they can to get it right for everybody and be fair.

But again, I don't think they listen, so they're going to do what they think they need to do.

**Q. That last 10 minutes, was that kind of your team in a nutshell, toughness?**

RICK BARNES: I'm really proud of our guys. It's so

different. Auburn dealt with the same thing. Everybody normally has more, at least a day or so, to prepare. These quick turnarounds, walking through, finding out last night when we walked through, this morning, a little bit more this morning, than probably usual.

Just proud of the fact that I thought everybody went in the game, did what we needed them to do. D Stone's two drives were big plays. Getting to the bonus early was important for us. I thought that was really, really important.

Johni Broome is such a tough guy to guard because he passes the ball. We started trying to double him some. Late when we had a three-point lead, we decided we were going to go back and play him as hard as we could straight up and take away the three-point line.

Again, both teams fought their hearts out. It was a high-level game, it really was. But I'm just proud, again, I told our guys, and I meant it, it's not about schemes this time of year. Again, I thought both teams showed a lot of toughness, a lot of fight. Today it came out our way.

**Q. For most of his career, Zakai has been a great defensive player who doesn't foul a lot. In the past month or so, there's a handful of games where he's gotten into foul trouble. How do you get him to be who he is without getting in those situations?**

RICK BARNES: Well, maybe it's someone looking out for me because I think him being on the bench has helped us. I think he's being more rested where he's able to do some good things at the end of the game. To be quite honest, if he wasn't in foul trouble, I wouldn't take him out. I probably should rest him more. We've talked about that for four years.

I trust him. We talk through the game. I constantly am asking him how he feels. Like today, our offense, in our floppy action, I thought that Jordan and even Z down there, when we put Shaq up top to play make, Chaz, I thought those guys really started getting in a rhythm, playing with each other, I thought we set some really good screens today.

But the silly ones are the ones, like last night I told him, I want you to pick up a cheap foul. He went out the next possession and he did it. I said, Deserves you right, because it's in his makeup. I don't want to take that from him.

Today he was in great command of himself because he's so competitive. I mean, if you could have been in the huddle hearing him talk to his team, big-time leader today. The way he saw the game developing, the way it unfolded,



he had a presence about himself today that was outstanding.

I think maybe sitting there, got to look at it a little bit different. Again, he was outstanding today.

**Q. Since the pandemic with the transfer portal, NIL, maybe it's parity, it doesn't seem to help top seeds in the NCAA tournament, there's no more assurance that we've got some data showing it's a lot more volatile since the pandemic for top seeds. Is there any explanation or is it simply make sure you go out and play? Is there anything you can put a finger on?**

RICK BARNES: I think there's a lot of things. Obviously the transfer portal has played a big role in it, some situations NIL, where people can rebuild quickly.

You look at Florida. Johni Broome was recruited as a mid-level player. He's national Player of the Year. You look at Zakai, wasn't recruited by anybody. Jordan Gainey, UFC upstate. Chaz Lanier, north Florida.

The same thing, just goes to show you there's players at every level. Certainly guard play.

I don't think there's been a post player that has moved up from a lower level that has made the impact ever that Johni Broome has. That doesn't translate like Garbine played us. You look around, it tells you.

When you get to the NCAA tournaments, those guys that we got, those are those guys now at those schools we're talking about, they get a chance to play. They're confident, they play.

You look around the league, I've always said there's enough players out there for everybody. You got to get the ones that work for you. But parity, is it real? It is. Going forward, I don't know where. Again, I can tell you right now I can assure you that every major program in the country's got a transfer portal board right now that's lighting up like you can't believe. Most of the time it would be those lower-round games that are looking to go up. If they're good enough to come up right now, they're good enough to be in the NCAA tournament.

**Q. This idea that the SEC tournament, winning it is tougher than winning the NCAA tournament, true or false?**

RICK BARNES: Well, you have to think about it. Yeah, it's tougher because of the fact if you win it, you have to go three days in a row. You're not going to have to do that, and you get a day in between. There's no day in between

here.

Such quick turnarounds. It's tough. I mean, I think as coaches we had our wish, we probably would wish it would end today because tomorrow it's going to be another hard-fought game for two teams. You turn around, with all the attention heading into March Madness, you got to keep your guys focused and there.

I just think anytime you go in, like these multiple team tournaments that we have early in the year, I think coaches are wanting to get away from the three days. It's a grind, hard on you, just because of the quick turnarounds, not your normal preparation.

It's really hard to win a conference tournament because... We haven't been in a three-day all year. We have in the past and it's tough to do that.

**Q. With the up-and-down season that D Stone has had, how impressive is it that he is able to stay the course?**

RICK BARNES: He's impressive. We've seen it before throughout the year. When a guy stays engaged and locked in. I think it speaks volumes about him as a pick and roll. We knew when we were recruiting him what a wonderful person he is.

He lost some dear people to him right before he got to Tennessee. He had a really tough fall where he missed some practice because he was just emotionally struggling. When you lose people that are close to him, as he did... But he fought back. I think he has so much respect for his teammates, they have for him, he's continued to do what we've asked him to do.

We're not surprised. But most of the time he's undersized at the four position where he normally plays. But he's a fighter. His drives were huge today. I thought he worked hard defensively to try to get things done for us. When you start doing some different schemes, him not being out there as much as everyone else, I thought today he handled it pretty well.

**Q. You fight all year to put yourself in a position to win a championship. You can win a trophy, get a banner tomorrow. Given how tough it is this year, what is still ahead, what is your message to the guys before tomorrow?**

RICK BARNES: Again, I think we're no different than the teams... Again, we've seen teams catch lightning, magic in a bottle this time of year. There's no doubt in my mind that Florida, Auburn, Tennessee, Alabama, go down the list,



they all came here with the idea to win this tournament. I don't think there's any question. Because of how close our league played out this year, how many teams you see go on the road. I think Ole Miss wins at Alabama. Things like that that happen.

When you have those kind of wins throughout the year, you feel like, We got a chance, we can play good basketball. I think there's a lot of teams that have the mindset they're going to come here, we all want to win a championship. Championship sets you apart.

Every year, some championship team is brought back to be recognized. Not so much runner-ups, but they do recognize championship teams. There's no doubt that we came here with the idea that we'd like to win a conference championship knowing it's going to be really hard.

Everyone did, I think. I believe that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports