

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes Nate Ament

## Ja'Kobi Gillespie

### Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 72, Auburn 62

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Tennessee. We'll start with an open comment from Coach Barnes, then take questions.

RICK BARNES: Again, kind of game that it seems the last three months in the SEC, just a battle from start to finish. Every possession. Both teams I thought played extremely hard today. Great respect for Steven as a first-year coach. I think he's done really well, I really do. I think the two games we had with them could have gone either way.

Our defense certainly got better as the game went on. Nate hasn't been very much with us since the Alabama game. I thought our offense started getting more and more smooth the longer the game went.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the players.

**Q. Nate, what have the last two weeks been like for you? How does it feel to have this sort of game?**

NATE AMENT: Me and Ja'Kobi actually just talked about it in the hallway. It's different when you get to sit and watch the game, watch them practice. I can kind of understand the things we need to do better, what we are as a team, running to get the ball. A lot of my energy and focus today was trying to get the big men involved as much as possible because I think we're a dangerous team when our big mans are playing well.

**Q. Ja'Kobi, how nice was it to have the guy next to you back today? How much did the run start on the defensive end?**



JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: I mean, it's great having Nate back. I feel like he's been just a great player for us all year, a great closer at the end of games.

I feel like second half at the end he just took over, won us the game really.

Defensively, yeah, we was talking about that. They're going to break if we just keep guarding them, keep being super physical. I feel like that's what we did.

**Q. Nate, when did you know you probably would be able to play? As you got into the game today, did it take you a while to get into your rhythm?**

NATE AMENT: I mean, me and all the coaches and our trainer, we've been in constant communication. I kind of knew early last night I was going to play.

But they've been working super hard with me. A lot of credit to them. And then me just trying to focus on getting everybody involved. I know that I don't have to do too much with this team for us to win. I don't got to shoot the ball every time, I don't got to do something with the ball every time. For me, it's just move the ball as much as I can. I know they'll pass it back to me, find me. For me, it's sharing the love for my teammates and in the end I can get a shot.

**Q. I know you want to enjoy this moment, but when you look to tomorrow, obviously you have Vanderbilt. Your thoughts...**

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Yeah, I mean, I feel like we've shown ourselves we can do it for one game. We have to show ourselves that we can stack games together and treat this game -- Vandy, they beat us at home. We got to come out and play with some urgency.

NATE AMENT: I didn't get to play last time, but watching the game, we can't come out slow like we did last time with a team like Vanderbilt. They're super well-coached, disciplined. If you give them some wiggle room, give them a lead early, they're going to capitalize it. For us, it's

respecting our opponents utmost and taking care of the game for a full 40 minutes.

**Q. Nate, how did you feel today? Seemed to indicate you felt okay.**

NATE AMENT: I felt great. Felt pretty good (smiling).

RICK BARNES: So you know, he wanted to play two weeks ago. We wouldn't let him. I didn't have anything to do with it. Obviously the right thing was to keep him.

Those high ankle sprains, especially to the inside, are really hard. Nate has done an incredible job with his rehab and our staff has.

Believe me, if we needed him to play, he would have played because he wanted to.

**Q. Nate, where do you think your game has improved the most from where you were to now?**

NATE AMENT: I think before I got here, I mean, I was someone that could just do a little bit of everything. I wasn't particularly super great at one thing.

Being with my Coach Barnes and all the assistant coaches in the game every day, working on physicality, getting stronger, finding the drive, my pull-up game, shooting midranges. Also learning the game, thinking the game. My IQ wasn't super high when I got here.

All these game reps and practice reps, I've been able to learn the game, learn my teammates, play on a team that everyone can play well, so...

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you. You're dismissed. We'll continue with questions for Coach Barnes.

**Q. Where was this team in your mind at the 10-minute mark? What do you think got them going?**

RICK BARNES: Well, first thing I said to them when I walked in the locker room, this is like a first-round NCAA game, second-round NCAA game. Auburn did play last night. They were settled in a little bit. I told our guys we've got to get through those jitters early. We got a great group of guys. They really want to win.

Again, Steven, what they do is really hard to defend. I thought no doubt in the first half they were way more physical than we were. They were doing a great job pushing us off our spaces. But then Nate, we did not know coming in. We didn't know. I didn't know what to expect. I

knew that we were going to start him simply because after he warmed up, we wanted to go right with him as opposed to bringing him off the bench.

He hasn't practiced with us in two weeks. Yesterday I bet he maybe had 10 minutes of reps with us. So I knew it would be a little bit slow offensively.

We were getting into ball screens way too much early. That's not what our plan was. But we got better defensively. We did. But it's a long game. Both teams I thought really competed at a high level.

**Q. Was there any kind of minutes restriction for Nate coming in?**

RICK BARNES: I didn't ask (smiling). No one said it to me. Chad came to my room late last night, our trainer. We talked about it.

I do know that high ankle sprains on the inside are difficult to deal with. I meant what I said. Nate wanted to play. He wanted to go back in the Alabama game and play. He said to me, which was not a good thing to say to me, Coach, my ankle sprain feels like every ankle sprain I've ever had. He said, I've always played.

But we're going to listen and pay attention to the diagnostics, all that stuff we get, the information. But that's just toughness overall.

No one told me today that we had a restriction. I thought they would, but they didn't. I didn't ask. I didn't ask.

**Q. You mentioned the physicality of the game. It almost seems like players are playing a different game than they were a decade ago. What are the challenges of coaching this type of physical basketball?**

RICK BARNES: Well, forget the coaches. It's the referees. How about the challenge they have?

I mean, it's a totally different game than it was. Our game is more physical than the NBA. You look, we obviously don't have the size and the mass that they have. In terms of the freedom of movement, trying to post up, all those type things.

The problem, I was on the Rules Committee. I don't want to get into it too deep. It was a couple years, obviously. Seems like everything wants to be done in two hours. You have referees some nights, if I call that foul, we'll be out here all night. I don't think that's their fault. I don't.

We got a rule book, got to officiate the rules of the game.

The problem is I guess different guys interpret rules differently. I think it's an extremely hard game to referee. Really hard.

The one thing I always say when I was on the Rules Committee, we need to have rules in place to help the referees officiate the game. The bodies are bigger. Guys are older than they were years ago. The physicality is going to be there.

I'm a big freedom of movement guy. I think guys have to be able to move and cut. If you can't do that, it's going to end up being a lot of ball screen stuff.

Again, I don't think anybody wants to see 40, 50 free throws a lot. But I do know this: players adjust. I mean, Ja'Kobi made a pretty quick adjustment tonight. Picked up two fouls, didn't foul anymore. Players want to play.

Again, it's a hard, hard game to officiate. It really is.

**Q. How much has Nate grown in playing through contact, yet still continuing to seek his shot?**

RICK BARNES: Tremendously. Nate has never complained about fouling. I said all year, he had one of the toughest whistles. I believe when you move underneath a guy when he drives, all those kind of things... All I've ever said is let's referee the midrange game like we do the three-point line. I realize around the basket it's difficult, there's a lot going on there. The midrange game, I don't think it is.

I think if you officiate it from the floor up, again, back in the day, we all taught that. When a guy goes up, show your hands high, but walk under him just a little nudge in there. That's more of a touch shot in some ways than a three-point shot.

Nate, from the time he arrived, we told him how tough it was going to be. We told him we were going to put him in every possible situation with a guy like Felix guarding him, a guy like DeWayne Brown, Jaylen Carey, Amari Evans. If you would've watched those guys go at each other all summer, Amari coming in and just any and every way we could put him in position to be physical with him.

The great thing about it, he never got hurt. Never complained. He just kept working through it, to try to get him used to what we thought he would see this year.

**Q. The past two games the offense has started off kind of slow, then picked up in the second half. Do you see a trend with that?**

RICK BARNES: That's a great observation (smiling). It's real slow. We were awful against Vandy to start the game, turning the ball over the way we did.

But again, tonight wasn't surprised. I knew Auburn would come out very physical, really try to take Ja'Kobi out. Probably Nate a little bit. We knew our post guys were going to have to be involved.

But we were hanging onto the ball. Ja'Kobi was hanging onto it too long. Nate was, too. Our post guys were rolling out way too deep. We talk about the short roll, spray it. It's a very fine line.

Again, that was the biggest thing we talked about at halftime. We're going to ball screen. There's got to be a shorter roll. Those guys have to get rid of it quicker.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

RICK BARNES: Thank you, guys.

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