

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Wednesday, October 18, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Tennessee Volunteers

### Rick Barnes

#### Men's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are going to go straight to questions with Coach Barnes.

**Q. I was doing some research, there's maybe seven guys in the league that have been with a program for four or five years. You have two of them. In this world where there's so much turnover on rosters, how good is it to still have some old hands? Your thoughts on Devo Davis, you faced him a lot.**

RICK BARNES: Well, it's awesome to have older guys. I go back last year when certainly Josiah and Santi were going through the process and wanting to know what they might end up doing, wondering what they might end up doing. I thought about the young guys, knowing it would be a major turnover with what we had lost.

With those guys coming back, it's really neat in practice watching them along with Josiah, Zakai, Santi and Jahmai Mashack coach those guys. You really think about it, these younger guys get a chance every day to practice against a team that pretty much went to the Sweet 16 last year.

But it's neat watching 'em do it. I think it's a huge advantage when you have older guys. I would tell you I hope we always have older guys. We still believe in what we try to do with our player development.

Getting old, staying old, I think is really important. You look at our league this year, this is an old league. It's an athletic league. It's a skilled league now. I think it's the best basketball league in the country.

You mentioned Devo Davis, obviously a super basketball player, a guy that gets your attention real quick when you talk about it. But he along with his teammates, when you get ready for this league, it's hard to focus on one guy on any team because the quality of talent has grown so much

the past couple years. I do think it's going to be the most competitive year the SEC has had, certainly since I've been in it.

**Q. What made you talk Santi into coming back? Where would you like to see him improve?**

RICK BARNES: Again, talking to him... He has meant so much to our program. He came in, along with Josiah, at a time when we were somewhat in a transition. Lamonte Turner was a guy that was really our best player at the time. He abruptly had to end the season with an injury. Santi walked on campus thinking he was going to probably be redshirted.

He practiced two days, played against LSU. I think he hit five threes in that game. He's totally transformed his body. He and Josiah went through a lot that first year, which I think has helped them both grow tremendously and players and people.

What Santi does every day, he's going to give you his best effort every day. He runs more than any other player I've ever seen in the halfcourt. We're talking about getting down the floor quick, but he runs so much more in the halfcourt than any other player I've ever coached. Not one part of his game he hasn't tried to get better with.

What I would tell you, it's amazing to me where he started as a defensive player and where he is today. I mean, he's going to take on any challenge. We're not afraid to switch with him at any position because he's going to fight and do what he needs to do.

He's in elite condition. He's the one guy that I don't want him to have to play as many minutes as he played last year, but he's a guy that could play that and more if he had to. Hopefully these younger guys can figure it out so we can use that depth, rest him. Hope at the end of the year he'll have a lot more left than he has the last couple years because he's had to play so much.

**Q. You just said this is an old league. Your friend in Kentucky has eight freshmen.**



RICK BARNES: Did he get some older guys in the portal?

**Q. Two sophomores, eight freshmen. What kind of challenge in this landscape of college basketball might he face there?**

RICK BARNES: It's tough when you're there. Like, again, I've got a great coaching staff, but I've got five guys that know what we're trying to get done out there that can help do it. If you don't have that, it does make it more difficult.

The word that John probably doesn't like, like any other coach, is 'patience'. You have to be really patient when you have that many young guys because you want to see 'em get better every day. Most young guys will have a good day, maybe next day not so much. If you tell them they've had a good day, you can almost bet it's not going to be as good the next day.

He has to balance a lot of different things, anytime you're coaching young guys, but knowing you have to get them to do a couple things well early, whereas with an older group, you can get a lot more done early in the year compared to the younger guys.

We would all tell you talent is a good thing to have. He certainly has that. But he's a terrific coach. Our league's got terrific coaches.

I do know this. In this league, every team where we start, where they start, will be better at the end of the year because of the level of coaching in this league.

**Q. Just wondering, as Tennessee fans mourn the loss of Bill Justice, what he meant to the program and what he meant to you as someone who is, compared to him, relatively new to Rocky Top.**

RICK BARNES: I did get the fortune to meet Bill. He loved Tennessee, he loved the Volunteers. He loved the basketball program. We all know he was a great basketball player.

I got a call, text, from Burke Burrelcamp [phonetic] a couple weeks ago and Mark Griffin telling me he wasn't doing well. I did try to reach out to him and get him, but I couldn't. I left a message.

It's just sad because we lost a great one, a great human being, but we also lost a great Volunteer.

**Q. What have been the challenges for Tobe learning to play the five and how has he grown over the off-season?**

RICK BARNES: I thought this summer, experience with USA Basketball is really good for him. He thought that helped him confidence-wise, a lot of different areas.

Tobe only knows one way to play. He's going to go all out. Learning the different coverages, he is continuing to do that. Our ball screen packages, the different things that we do.

Again, he's a player that we're not afraid to switch with. He's quick. He's agile. He has great mobility. He's going to play hard. The guys will tell you they love him. They would tell you they don't particularly want to go against him in practice because he sets screens, probably three quarters of them are illegal, but he hits.

Sometimes he does it not even knowing he's doing it. He's going to be a big part. He, Jonas and J.P. Estrella, those guys, are going to be really important to us up on that front line.

I tell you, everybody on our team will tell you we're glad that Tobe is wearing the orange and white because he's a guy that just goes at it every day.

**Q. Obviously being a former Texas coach, having another former Texas coach coming in, Chris Beard, what is your familiarity with Chris? Ultimately, what does he bring to the SEC?**

RICK BARNES: When Chris was with Coach Knight at Tech, really we were -- Texas and Texas Tech staff were close with each other. Chris obviously went to Texas, did an unbelievable job at Texas Tech. Did a great job at Texas. He was building that program, putting his footprint there, wanting it to get done.

He will do an outstanding job. I don't care where he's coaching, he's going to do an outstanding job. He got a great staff. He's done what I think coaches have been around, they know how to put a staff together quickly. I know they did a really good job on the portal, waiting to see a couple more guys they can get eligible.

Chris is going to do a great job.

**Q. When you talk about the importance of getting old and staying old, with the transfer portal, how much more attention must a staff pay over the course of a year, all year long to player retention? What do you and your staff do now maybe more to be more attentive to that over the year?**

RICK BARNES: I think now when you recruit young guys, I think you almost have to look at it through a two-year

window. If they're not playing for you by their sophomore year, they're probably thinking about maybe I should go somewhere else.

As much as you hate to see that happen, we sometimes lose a guy that we don't want to lose knowing they're going to have a chance their third and fourth year to be a major impact in the program.

With that said, we have to keep up with what's going on, our staff does. You used to worry about the opponents you're playing, but with the portal being what it is and knowing that now has shrunk, and if you're in postseason playing you are going to have to be organized, knowing that while you're playing games, you're going to have to be aware of the portal, trying to get started there.

We've had some grad transfers last year, we're really excited about the guys we got out of the portal this past year. They're going to be impact players. They're going to help us a lot.

But from a coaching staff standpoint, from the time the season starts, we have to keep our eye on all that and work at it knowing that at the end of the year we need to add to our roster, we got to be ready to go do that.

**Q. What was your big takeaway last year from the deep runs that San Diego State and FAU made?**

RICK BARNES: It's what I've said forever. I think there's enough players in the country for everybody. I think you got to find the ones that fit your system, buy into what you're trying to coach.

Through the years we've all seen a lot of different things happen in the NCAA tournament, seedings is important, all those type of things.

I'll be quite honest, I thought when we got our draw, I thought it was a good draw for us. The two teams I thought we would have a difficult time with if we ended up facing them would Florida Atlantic, and then Memphis, and Fairleigh Dickinson without Zakai. We knew their style of play would be aggressive, putting a lot of pressure on the guards. I think we're more suited to play any style this year than we've probably been to play in a long time with different guys out there.

With that said, you get in a tournament, seedings matter, we all know you got to catch some luck here or there. I just think there's so much parity, I think the portal is going to do that now, too. I think you're going to see guys, you can never take getting into the tournament for granted. You got to get there. When you get there, I think we've all seen

enough to know if you get going, anything can happen.

I think you'll see more of that. But the transfer portal is going to make a difference, it is, in terms of what might happen in post-season.

If you can play this game, can you play it. There's a lot of players out there that go unnoticed but can really play. All you got to do is look at NBA rosters. There's a lot of guys out there that people haven't heard about that can play. I think it's going to show up more in the years to come because of where we are with our game right now.

**Q. You already talked about the luxury of having veteran guys. When you look around the league, you have a lot of other top teams, they're blending in so many different players from different places. How much does that change the landscape as you look at trying to project the league November, December?**

RICK BARNES: Well, again, I think you go back, like we've always felt that it benefits us by playing a hard non-league schedule. We believe that. You get ready for conference play, once you get there now we all know each other, obviously, because we play against each other, and Tennessee's are pretty much in place by then.

The fact is, I've said from a non-league standpoint, winning 20 games doesn't matter. That's not going to get you into the post-season. Strength of schedule, who you play, how you develop is what's going to happen. When you get into conference play, there's not a coach in this league or any league in the country that will look, I don't care who they're playing, I don't care if they're playing a team that has won three games in their building, I don't think there's a coach that thinks they're going to go in there and it's going to be easy. It's not supposed to be easy.

The way this league has grown over the last couple years, the depth in it, it's going to be a dogfight, it is. Then obviously injuries, players staying healthy, all that comes into play.

But it will be, and then I'm hoping what we go through in non-league, somebody was asking me about being ranked, within the first week of the season you go into Maui, which is in Honolulu now, you can come out of there, really good teams, with two losses or more. It's just tough.

We want to be in those situations, thinking long-term it helps us get better.

Players want to play those schedules. I can tell you that. My guys tell me that all the time, they want to go in and play as many big games as they can play. They would

probably tell you they're not great fans of bye games, but we know we have to do that, too. Even those bye games, those guys can play because what we were talking about with the portal, we'll play some teams this year that have a whole new roster that we don't even know about.

Every game is important. You hear that, but it is. You can't afford to stump your toe at any point in time because you get into March, you're on that bubble for some reason, wherever you are, anything you do in November can come back and cost you. You just can't let that happen. You got to be ready from the get-go.

**Q. Your reaction coming into today when you learned that the media has picked the Volunteers to win the SEC.**

RICK BARNES: I don't know that I had much of a reaction, to be quite honest.

I think it's a compliment obviously. Certainly it's a compliment to our players, our program. It's fun. I think it's a fun time of year. Yesterday I had three or four people around Knoxville come up and congratulate me. I honestly didn't know what they were talking about till somebody told me.

I think those polls are obviously for the media and the fan bases to do that. You got to go win games. Again, you embrace it. I mean, I hope we're that good. I really do. I really do hope we're that good and better.

We'll always be more concerned with what we do day to day in practice, getting ready for each game. Like I said, I tell our guys once we walk on the floor and once way start playing our first game, every game is a 19 tournament game if you want to get there. Whether you're picked to win it, I guess when you're picked to win a league, you're ranked, you have a big bull's-eye on your back. You have to embrace that, know if you really embrace it, you're going to get better every night.

That's the key from now, how much better can we get from now till the end of basketball season.

**Q. Teams have taken mid-major stars and bringing them to the high-major level. How has the need for those mid-major stars to translate to stars at the next level impacted the variance in results for certain teams?**

RICK BARNES: First of all, when I say I want to get old, we're really excited about our freshman class. We think that class is going to win a lot of games for us. We're really excited.

I think when you think about the portal, you go into it, obviously, to address direct needs that you feel like you need to answer. I don't know if you can know that until you get there. I've said that about recruits, players. Until you live with someone every day, you're with them, you don't know exactly what you're going to get out of them.

I can tell you of our two transfer guys, Dalton Knecht and Jordan Gainey, we're excited. Do I think we helped ourselves by bringing those guys into our program? Absolutely, 100%. We needed to improve our shooting, develop our skills. We needed to improve guys that can create their own shots when it gets down to late clock. I think those guys will help us do that.

The fact they're experienced, like going through this time of year right now, you can see where young guys struggle right now a little bit because we're really in the dog days right now, the hardest time of the year practice-wise.

Guy started out, done a great job. You can tell in the last couple days, they've wavered a little bit whereas those guys, they haven't missed a beat. They're continuing to climb with the older guys.

That's another by-product of the portal, getting older guys, they've been through the grind of it. Most of those guys probably were high-level players. Jordan Gainey led the nation in three-point shooting as a freshman, last year had a big target on his back. He knows what it is like to be guarded every night.

High-level scorer that teams game plan for. Both of those guys being here going against our team every day, two guys, three guys that can really defend, has helped them.

They certainly know there is a standard we want to get them to from the defensive standpoint, that they've got to get there for us. I think with each guy that you bring in, really and truly you're not sure totally until you get with him and get into the grind of this time of year and see how it's going to work out.

Thank you, guys.

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