

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes

### Men's Media Day Press Conference

RICK BARNES: I've got to point out Coach Sanderson in the background here. The year I spent with him was a great year for me and learned a lot from him and still do some things that we did when we were together.

I didn't think at that time I'd be back in the SEC for 10 years, but it's been a really neat way to watch this league grow, where we've now become -- we talk about this being the best athletic conference in the country. I think that we can really say that we've got the best basketball league in the country. Really proud of the coaches in our league, how hard they work.

I go back to my first year when Commissioner Sankey took over, and he talked about basketball and how much we needed to grow it, and he said he would do his part. He's done that, and just watching it grow over the last 10 years it's been fun to be a part of it.

**Q. You're lifelong friends with Coach Cal. Your thoughts on his transition to Arkansas, how much did that blindside you, and what your expectations are for Mark Pope at Kentucky?**

RICK BARNES: Well, he and I had talked about it before he actually made that move. We go back a long time. We started a relationship back in 1975, '76 at the University of Pittsburgh, a camp that we both worked. He was going into his senior year, I had just graduated from college, and we've had a dear friendship since that time.

He'll do great. Just like wherever he's gone, he's built a winner. He's one of the great coaches of all time, and he will make it even tougher than it's ever been to play at Arkansas.

I'm happy for him because I think he's happy, and what he did at Kentucky was really unbelievable if you look back on it in his time there. But what he did at Memphis, UMass,



everywhere he's been, he's a winner, and he'll continue to do that.

**Q. Obviously a lot of your colleagues kind of left the game when there were a lot of these changes happening. How have you been able to navigate this changing landscape in college basketball and continued to succeed?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I've always talked to the players about you have to adjust, and throughout life you have to adjust. There's a lot of things that, as you can imagine, has changed in my time in the game, but this is probably the most radical changes that we've ever dealt with.

And the fact is, whether you agree or disagree, if you want to stay in the game, you've got to be willing to embrace what's happening at that point in time, and that's where we are. Hopefully as we keep sorting through all this going on right now, it gets to a place where everybody likes it, players included, everyone, but it's really just a matter of adjustment. You have to adjust.

Just with our team, we talk about our team constantly every day where we've got to make adjustments to what we're doing, and I don't think it's different with our profession.

**Q. You talked about your long-term friendship with Cal. He's got one of your former players, Jonas. How does that work when you're friends but maybe a player is switching teams within the league? And what do you think of Jonas, what kind of player he is and what he can do for Arkansas?**

RICK BARNES: Well, we certainly enjoyed having Jonas, but again, that's part of the game today when players decide they want to go in the portal and maybe see their value, what it's worth. That's what Jonas wanted to do.

And it has not affected my relationship with Cal or anybody else. It's up to a player to make that decision. Just so happens he chose to stay in the league, and we'll play against him once for sure, maybe more through the tournament.



Again, we appreciated what Jonas did for our program, and I'm sure he'll do what Cal asks him to do there because he's a guy that -- he's that kind of person, player. But regardless, in today's world of where we are, when players leave and go wherever, we just move on and do what we need to do, and that's what we do.

**Q. I'm wondering, we all know there's going to be change in the off-season, players leaving, players going. How difficult is it to manage a player leaving in mid-season as sometimes happen and may happen more?**

RICK BARNES: Well, again, all I can tell you is we're a team. I've always gone into every year thinking about a team, and really I believe in thinking about what could be the worst scenario that could happen, if this happens, that happened, what would we do.

So we've built in some things in our program that we always have is we'd like to think we could survive anybody leaving at any point in time. Could it get more difficult? It could. But you could also look at it like it gives someone else a chance who maybe hasn't had the opportunity.

What I know you can't do is complain about it, moan about it. This is what it is. This is where we are today, and we've got to make the best of that situation.

But we always think about the what-ifs with our guys in terms of injuries or whatever it may be, and that's why we really try to create as much versatility in our program with our players. They have to do more than one thing, try not to put them in a box to where they're limited to only a few things because you never know what might you need him to do later on.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about Zakai Zeigler. He's going into his senior year. How important is he going to be on this team, and what kind of growth do you think you'll see with Zeigler this year?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I could stand here all day and talk about Zakai and what he's meant to our program. He's one of the most unselfish human beings I've ever been around in my life. Totally as good a teammate -- as a coach, there's not a coach in the country that would not want to coach him and be around him every day because, again, he's one of the most consistent people I've ever been around.

I never worry about him coming to practice, what kind of effort, what kind of attitude he's going to bring. I don't care if it's in June, July, August, wherever it is, he's going to

bring his max effort. A guy that never complains, hates missing practice. If it's left up to him, he would play 40 minutes a night. He would take every rep in practice.

He's made as much an impact on our program as any program I've ever been in terms of what he's done. That's talking about a guy that when we recruited him, we thought we were going to redshirt him, and then after one week in practice, we knew we couldn't do that.

What he's continued to do and the way he continues to grow, anything he does, I promise you will be to help his teammate and our team and our program grow to be the best it can be because he is such a great individual person.

But like I said, one of the great teammates ever and a guy that truly wants to win at the highest level.

**Q. Inevitably fans and media are going to try to find the next Dalton Knecht. Not just on your team but across the country they're going to be looking for that. How do you manage that, whether it's Dubar or Lanier or any of those guys, making sure they're playing their game and not listening to the hype of what they could be or should be?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I'm like all those people you're talking about. I'm looking for him, too. But it really is a good question because, again, a year ago when I was standing here, what he did, we could never -- I could have never imagined it.

At this point in time a year ago, he would have said to you, I'm not sure I'm going to start. Just so happened that we get ready to go play our first really exhibition game against Michigan State, Z is not ready to come back yet, Santi had a death in his family, and I remember we were going to start Dalton because of where the numbers were.

I remember talking to him before the game, and I remember talking to Tom Izzo prior to the game, we were talking about our team, I said I'm going to start this guy, but I promise you, if he doesn't try to play defense today, I'm going to make a point that I'm going to set him down to let him know that you're not going to play if you don't try to play defense.

Well, without question he went out and far exceeded what I thought he could do defensively, then what he did on the offensive end. And then it goes back to Jahmai Mashack saying to me that day, Coach, the way he played offense is what we've seen during the summer. But I was more impressed with the fact that he had made that effort.

The best part about him was he endeared himself to his

teammates and his teammates embraced him. Your point, too, that other guys thinking it's just going to happen, it won't just happen. What we do talk about is them being a star in their role, whatever that may be.

And I've told them before, he made us change. We did some things later on that we weren't even practicing this time of year, but once we saw what he could do and especially when the lights came on, we were able to add some different things and play off of him more, and like everyone else, I hope that's going to happen with this team, too, with someone.

**Q. Coach, what keeps you energized?**

RICK BARNES: Young people getting to go to the gym every day. I love practice. I love the game of basketball. I really truly could stay in the gym all day with the guys. I love guys that have a dream and they want to go after it. Really to be brutally honest with them, to talk to them about where they want to go, it's almost virtually impossible to get there if you don't have the entire package to do it.

But I love our players. I love it. Again, being around young people certainly helped me. I have a great time with them.

Sitting in the locker room after the game having dinner with them almost every day and cutting up and them making some comments about my comments during practice is pretty funny, and hearing them imitate me and some things I don't even know I say, to be honest with you. It's fun.

Again, just being with the players is really what I love about the game.

**Q. Just wanted to ask you about Chaz Lanier, obviously the ace under the SEC, it's a big jump. How has he handled that, and what have you seen from him so far that gives you confidence that he's making that jump well?**

RICK BARNES: Well, again, a great kid, great person that works hard. He wants to be a good player. He would tell you if he were -- he knew coming in it was going to be a whole different level than what he had experienced in the past couple years.

But again, his teammates have a lot of respect for him. They know what he's capable of doing. He's got a chance -- I think he's just really getting started to how good a player he can be. Can he shoot it? Obviously the numbers show that, to do that.

But he's more than that. He's been dealing with an injury that set him back a little bit, but he'll get back from that, and

he's a guy, again, that our players have a lot of respect for. They have confidence in him, for him to do what we brought him to Tennessee to do, and that's to score the basketball.

**Q. How much did Dalton Knecht help you in recruiting from the portal and in high school in terms of the way you guys were able to showcase him? And part two of that, do you prefer to have a guy like that that's a real go-to guy or maybe a little bit more balanced approach like you've had in the past?**

RICK BARNES: Well, it's been fun having what I guess people would call closers. There's no doubt late in games that we've had certain players that we knew that when it got down to winning time that we had a guy that we could go through that was going to not maybe score the point but make the right play.

The majority of our teams have probably been based more on versatility, multiple guys doing different things. It goes back to what we were talking about earlier about having a group that, depending on how it evolves, if a guy does step up and show you that he's a guy you can play through, I think we're willing to do that.

But yet with Dalton, I can tell you we always talk to him about making the right play, and when he got going, everybody knew it, and it was a thing of beauty. When he got it -- I can tell you during time-outs when he got going at certain times, I would hear his teammates say, We're going to get him open, you get him the ball and let him do the rest.

I've always said -- I kid about it because I've said during the game when he gets going, I said, the jockey has got to know when to get off the horse, and let him ride it, and when you have guys like that, it's fun. I'll tell you, it really is, especially to see it get going.

But do you expect it year in and year out, sometimes you can't, so that's where it goes back to trying to put together the best team you can and hope that they just really make great plays and get quality shots and they knock them down.

**Q. Obviously you're somebody that prides yourself on defense and little things. Is it more difficult to find that in the portal era with guys looking for NIL and things along those lines, guys that want to buy into what you want to do?**

RICK BARNES: I think it's like when you go shopping anywhere. You go into a big furniture store there's a lot of sofas you can pick. You've got to find one you want to live



with. I think that's the way it is in the portal. You've got to decide what you think works in your program. You've got to have coaches, which I'm blessed to have, that really do the intel work on guys, and you've got to know what that person is about.

So when we talk about transparency, we do it in recruiting to where we go in the portal, we're looking for specific things and what we think most of all that will fit our program, not just our team, and know that we believe in our current players are going to do their job to help anyone that comes into the program to understand what we're about, where we want to go, what we want to do.

But you've got to be careful. When you're in the portal, you've got to make sure that it's what you need and what you want and not what someone else is trying to kind of push on you.

**Q. Jahmai, obviously, talk about his defense and how good this backcourt can be. Defense has been kind of at the center of everything you've built at Tennessee. Is this the best defensive backcourt group you've had?**

RICK BARNES: I've never thought Jahmai really got the recognition he deserves for defense. I think most people look at blocked shots and steals and think that's what makes good defensive players. It really doesn't. Obviously it's a part of it, but it's not the major thing.

What Jahmai does with what he does guarding the ball but also what he does to bring our defense together along with Zakai, those two guys are certainly -- they both have great pride in wanting to be defensive players. They want to do that. They grew up trying to fight their way through this game and get where they are.

And I think Jahmai is a great example of a guy that we talk about being a star in your role, he understands that. He embraces it. Again, I'm not sure there's a better defensive player when you look at maybe not steals or blocked shots but in terms of what he does to impact a game is special.

**Q. I just want to circle back on Pope and the transition at Kentucky. What is Kentucky getting in Coach Pope, and what does it mean for the landscape of the SEC?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I think you've got someone that knows what he's into at Kentucky, what it's about, being there, being a former player. I've been around Mark on the road, and I can just tell you, wonderful person.

He's going to -- you look at his teams, he won where he had been, and I think that he quickly has put his mark on the program in terms of maybe just walking into the

facilities and changing what was there. It could be a totally different -- you can send messages like that, what you want it to be.

I'm sure all that's different than it used to be, I would think. But I don't know. But I would think that.

But I think he's very comfortable in who he is, and I think he's also lived in that system. In terms of the Blue Nation, he's been a part of it, he understands it, and he I'm sure will do a fine job there.

**Q. With Texas joining the league, you've faced them three times since the beginning of the tenure there. Does that game still have any extra meaning to you at this point? And we know what Texas has brought to the league as a football program, but your background with the men's basketball program, what do they bring in that area?**

RICK BARNES: Well, again, I just think with the addition of Texas and Oklahoma, just solidifies that we're the best league in the country in multiple sports. All the way across the board, really.

It's been 10 years since I've worked at University of Texas, and I love Texas. 17 years of my life spent there working with one of the all-time great athletic directors in the country in DeLoss Dodds and a friendship with Mack Brown that will go forever.

Obviously the coaching staff there now, a lot of it was a part of my staff when I was there, and they had a lot to do with our success, as much as anyone.

So do I have a special place in my heart for Texas? I do. But when we play them, does it -- other than when we go there, a lot more people come around to say hello; otherwise, we go about it the same way.

I can tell you I'm extremely blessed to have the chance to be the head coach at University of Tennessee. But I think it's great for our conference that Texas and Oklahoma are here, and honestly my favorite part about thinking about playing Texas is I get to see my grandkids for a day while I'm there and spend a little bit of time with them.

But that part is probably my favorite part about going back there because I know that Rodney is going to do a great job, and he's going to have a hard team to play and beat there.

But again, I'm happy for them, and again, I've still got so many friends there at the university that I have just an incredible amount of respect for.

