

GEICO Players Era Men's Championship

Monday, November 24, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

Rutgers Scarlet Knights Coach Steve Pikiell

Postgame Press Conference



Tennessee 85, Rutgers 60

STEVE PIKIELL: Tennessee's size is tremendously impressive. Obviously he's a great coach. We got off to a tough start, especially midway through that first half. In the second half we came back and fought and won the second half 30-29.

But obviously give them a ton of credit. That's a really good basketball team. We had no answers for Gillespie, their point guard, and Nate is the real deal.

Congratulations. We don't have a long time to stew over this. We've got Notre Dame tomorrow at 10:00 so we've got to bounce back. We learned a lot about our team today. He was great, needed him to be like that, too, moving forward.

Q. Steve, looked like you gave Gevonte some time off the bench. What was the thinking behind that?

STEVE PIKIELL: Yeah, beef. We needed some beef. This team is the No. 1 rebounding team in America. They've been plus 21 on the glass against everybody. Obviously they were plus 15 tonight.

Just wanted to play our guys that are 250 and above because they have like five of them at are at that size. So got to get those guys some minutes. He's been working hard, too. So has Harun. Some of our other freshmen got some minutes tonight, too, so going to learn a lot in the next three days.

Q. Not many guys built like Nate, that size and mobility. What kind of challenges did he present?

STEVE PIKIELL: I mean, we were comparing him to Ace Bailey a little bit, boy, but he's bigger and really knows how to play. Just a tough matchup at 6'10". He looks every bit 6'10", 6'11".

And then they've got the great point guard. I know moved from Maryland. He had an unbelievable year. We were trying to do a great job on him and limit his touches. He can set people up and he can score himself. He's really a tough, tough matchup. Those are their two leading scorers, and you've got to take one of them out.

In the second half I just thought we did a little bit better job all the way around, but they got off to such a big lead that -- but he's the real deal.

Q. It seemed like a lot of open shots for Tennessee in the first half. What did you see from your defensive rotations in the first half?

STEVE PIKIELL: Yeah, whenever we hit the switch on anything, on open shots, like I think Nate made some tough ones, obviously Gillespie; they run a lot of stuff for him.

I thought they're as good a post-up team, so I was really concerned with their post-up ability. I thought we did a pretty good job taking that away, and obviously you're giving up something on the perimeter.

That's what kind of happened. But we spent a few days, like they're really an elite post-up team. And there's not many post-up teams anymore, but every one of their guys can seal you in the post and finish.

Obviously their No. 1 offense is offensive rebounding, so got to do a good on that and post job defense, they've got some shooters, too, obviously.

Q. You guys are going to face teams of similar talent like Tennessee in the Big Ten. Does a result like that worry you about where this --

STEVE PIKIELL: No. Early in the year you're worried about everything and you're trying to find a rotation with 10 newcomers.

But this is a top-10 basketball team. We have teams like that in the league. We've got to get used to that. We had some moments tonight where we were fine, but we're still figuring some stuff out.



Their size is elite. They really have elite size, and they just keep bringing guys off the bench. So tip of the hat. He's a Hall of Fame coach and he's got some size on this roster.

We have some teams in the league that kinda look like that but not that big.

Q. You said before you learned a lot about your team today. What did you learn?

STEVE PIKIELL: Well, we kept fighting. This was one of those games. Second half, we won the half. When you come into halftime and you spot a top-10 team that many points, you can do two things, and we just kept fighting. Win the half 30-29, hold them to 29 points, you've got to take some positives.

Obviously it's a loss and we've got to turn this around tomorrow and play a really good Notre Dame team who's one of the best offensive rebounding teams, too, in the country.

So different challenge Notre Dame will be, but a big challenge. Big challenge.

Q. You talked about the size of this Tennessee team. You shot 36 percent from the field. Did you see anything specifically that they did defensively that kind you held you guys in check?

STEVE PIKIELL: Yeah, well, they make it hard. I thought we got the ball moving sideways -- we showed some real signs of executing too in second half, and I thought we had some open looks, too, that we didn't make.

We continued to make one and one opportunities from the free-throw line. A game like this you've got to take advantage of all the times you get to the free-throw line, too, because they do foul and that kind of thing.

But their length is a problem. They've got really good athleticism and they're really deep. It's a really good basketball team. That causes more problems than anything.

Q. We're in Vegas and obviously there have been some gambling things happening within our sport. What's the message been to your team as more as more college basketball players are vulnerable to guys in that world?

STEVE PIKIELL: Yeah, we're always constantly reminding them of the rules and of all the battles and pitfalls that are out there for athletes. They've got to make great decisions always. On the basketball court you want them to make

great decisions, off the court make great decisions.

Certainly in a gambling world there's no place for it in college basketball, and these guys know that. Hopefully we can get that under control, but it's everywhere.

Everywhere you turn, every time you turn your phone on, it's a part of our society now. These guys got to make great decisions. They're given a great opportunity, and make sure they don't do anything to lose that opportunity.

Q. You mentioned Notre Dame tomorrow; how important is it for this team to get that win?

STEVE PIKIELL: Well, every game you play is important. Every game you play -- these are really good basketball teams. You've got to play well. You've got to play 40 minutes. Every game is important to win. Every game for every coach. Every coach that's going to sit up here is going to tell you the same thing.

Need to keep growing our team. We went up against a big boy today and that's what it's all about. Hopefully this experience today will help us for the next couple days here and then we've got Purdue and we've got Michigan, and that's what this league is, and that's what we signed up for.

Those are the challenges that we have, and all of them are tough, and you try to take them one at a time.

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