

GEICO Players Era Men's Championship

Monday, November 24, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Rick Barnes

Ja'Kobi Gillespie

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 85, Rutgers 60

Q. How do you get your team to go from what they just did to preparing for a physical Houston team tomorrow?

RICK BARNES: Well, it's difficult, obviously, when you play a tough -- three games for everyone out here. Just great respect. Kelvin and I have known each other as long as anybody in the business, and great respect for Kelvin and his team.

We'll get back and do everything pretty much in the ball room, get ready. We also know it's going to be a hard, physical game. We know each other. But really proud of the effort of these guys today. I thought Ja'Kobi was terrific, continues to do what we need him to do, learning how to run the point for our team.

Tomorrow there's no doubt that they'll have a lot of pressure pushed his way along with Nate, and the physicality will be a little bit different probably.

But this time of year, we, like most teams here, are still finding our way, too, and you come out of this tournament knowing obviously a little bit more about yourself and what you need to do, which way you need to move, what direction.

But we'll look forward to it. We're here, and you love to play in big games. Again, they're all big, obviously, but we know it's going to be a very, very physical game.

Q. It looked like you had said something to Nate after you pulled him in the first half, having only taken one field goal up to that point. After he went back in, more assertive, I think three straight. What was your



message to him and what did you think about his response?

RICK BARNES: Nate is a very, very unselfish player. We obviously had two scrimmages, one against Ohio State, one against Duke, and we played our games at home and we're here. He's learned something every game.

He knows -- he went through some games where he pressed too hard early, just being a competitive player, wanting to try to make something happen early as opposed to letting the game come to him, and he's getting better and better with that.

He missed a shot. I was really impressed because he had been struggling a little bit from the three, and the one thing we've told him, we don't doubt it, when you're open, we expect you to shoot it and we expect it to go in.

I thought after he missed the first one, he really made a great effort to stay down on the next one and you could almost feel like the lid came off of the thought process in terms of, okay, I'm good to go here.

He's only going to get better and better. Just understanding how people are guarding him, adjusting from game to game. He really has done a pretty good job overall with that.

I expect he'll continue to do that. He'll be a different player six weeks from now than he is right now because of his mindset and so unselfish, and whatever it's going to take to try to help us win games, he's going to do it.

Q. It's one thing to be versatile, but for Ja'Kobi to have so much success on the ball and off the ball, how rare is that? How much does that help this team?

RICK BARNES: Well, he'd rather shoot it 50 times a game; am I right?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: I shot 20, so...

RICK BARNES: You know what, he's a very versatile player, and we do want him off the ball. That was why it was important that we -- we like him off the ball, but we also like him with the ball. He's learning for the first time in his career to play with a guy that he can lob to. He's never



had guys he could lob to. He's got a number of different guys on our team, so he's had to learn that.

He's had to learn our system, what we're trying to do. But I think what he's done really the last couple games, he's really been able to get his teammates involved but yet keep himself involved. He'll get better with that, too.

We've seen him; he had 36 or so in the scrimmage against Ohio State, and so we've seen him have days like this shooting it. The next game against Duke he came out pressing too much, and I think he learned from that.

He's just gotten better as a point guard off the ball. He knows how to play. He does. But I think he truly, in our opinion, certainly one of the very best point guards in the country. We wouldn't trade him for anybody. But off the ball, too, we love him doing that because he's going to move, get open, and he's just very unselfish.

Q. Rick, how important was it for you guys to get Bishop and JP back, and what did you see from those two?

RICK BARNES: Coming out here, we didn't know they were going to play. We really didn't. They both have done a great job with their rehab, spending time with Chad and G and just really working at trying to get back.

When we walked into practice yesterday they were both saying they were going to try a little bit and we left them not much, and today we knew we had just a few minutes we were going to play them to see how they responded. They responded well from practice yesterday.

We'll see how tomorrow goes because we've got to obviously play the long game. But I thought Bishop defensively -- I thought both of them, for the fact they haven't had much practice, came in and did a good job for us.

Q. Ja'Kobi, what did your morning look like leading into the game? Do you prefer to play all games at 10:00 in the morning now, and what was working so well for you today?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: I would say it wasn't really hard to get up because I think I'm still used to eastern time. I got up probably like 6:30. But I would say what was going for me was when I hit my first one, it felt good, and then we were just running our offense and they were going under a lot of stuff and leaving me open so I was able to knock it down.

Q. When you have a guy like Nate with that size and

versatility, how does that open up the floor for someone like you and your teammates?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: Yeah, it opens it up a lot because they're not going to help off him, and if they do, he'll make them pay. Just being able to drive those gaps and also play off of him because he's obviously a good scorer because he's also unselfish, so it really opens it up.

Q. Rick, you've had some great teams, great tandems. This tandem of Ja'Kobi and Nate has the potential to be the best in the country but they're obviously going to get better during the course of the year. What do you like about those two players?

RICK BARNES: Well, first thing I like about them, they both have great work ethics. They want to be good. They know they've got to get better. They don't take practice lightly. They come in and they work.

How good they can be? They can be special. There's no doubt about that, because I think anytime you're willing to put the work in that they do, and both of them are very unselfish, and they're still learning to play with each other.

I can tell now we get into some actions where they are really starting to see each other, find each other, which is important, obviously. Defensively they both are a work in progress in terms of what they have to do. Ja'Kobi now is getting -- he's going to get hit a lot. He's guarding the ball, and he's gotten so much better in the time he's been with us. I think he can be elite on both ends of the court.

Nate, physically, people are really trying to get after him, but he's gotten better and will continue to get better.

When I think about both of them, it's not just one or two things they do, it's their all-around game, and they both have really good basketball IQs. They can adjust pretty quick on the fly, which is obviously very important from a coaching standpoint.

Q. It felt like Nate really showed what he's capable of offensively today just from his three-point shooting, making tough jumpers. What did you think of the way he played offensively?

JA'KOBI GILLESPIE: I thought he played good. I got on him at the beginning because he didn't shoot an open three. But I feel like he was just kind of letting the game come to him and not trying to force anything. Yeah, I feel like he played great offensively.

Q. Rick, with Bishop, how much does his energy and defense really set the tone? He checked into the game



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today and immediately dives on the floor for a loose ball coming off of injury.

RICK BARNES: Well, Bishop had the good fortune to get to play against Jahmai Mashack for a year and he understands the importance of that role and can be better at it in terms of he was able to learn from a guy that could really impact the game on that end.

Bishop has gotten himself in really terrific cardio shape where he can play even when he's tired, which is -- you've got to be able to do that if you're going to sustain that kind of effort.

But he's got great feet, but he's got -- it's an identity that he really wants to create for himself. Bishop played football in high school, and he's got that kind of mentality that he's not afraid to get in there and lock up with somebody and really go at it with them.

Again, I was really impressed with him today for the fact that he hadn't really practiced since the games he's missed. But he stayed focused in terms of where we were in practice every day, and just really proud of what he did today. But he's got a chance to be as good as he wants to be.

Q. This tournament is going to expand next year and the years beyond that. What's the value of being in this tournament?

RICK BARNES: Well, I think anytime you're in a situation this time of year with high-level competition - and it is, every team pretty much from a Power Four conference.

But we're all still trying to figure out, too, for the most part -- I mean, there's a couple teams in the country with returning players. We know how important retention is, but when you have as many guys young as we have, and a lot of teams, it really is helpful. It is.

Obviously it's a great tournament. When it expands, it's only going to get better and better. I just think it's great to have a chance to play against the level of competition that these guys get to before -- we've got a month or so before we get into conference play, and you get a chance to really leave here and know which direction you need to move with your team.

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