

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Wofford vs Tennessee

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes Chaz Lanier Zakai Zeigler

Media Conference

Tennessee 77, Wofford 62

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes and student-athletes Chaz Lanier and Zakai Zeigler. Coach?

RICK BARNES: Really proud of our players' focused to get ready for this game, how hard they had to play today against a truly -- really Dwight Perry, I can't tell you how impressed I am with him and his staff. They played hard, they competed and it was a hard-fought game, exactly what we thought.

I thought a year ago with having Jahmai and Z playing against those guys -- because we had a close game against them at our place earlier in the year last year. Going back to look at that, I know our players had the utmost respect for Wofford coming in. We knew it was going to be a hard-fought game because those guys have much improved from a year ago.

I just can't say enough about Wofford and their coaching staff. Because, again, they were a really tough opponent here in the first round.

But, again, proud of our guys for having to grind it out the way we did tonight.

Q. Zakai, you broke the program assist record and what did you see to get 12 tonight?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: It was a big blessing. We knew that was going to be there. We watched a lot of film. I gotta give a lot to my coaches and my teammates, just seeing an open



guy and not trying to force too much. Breaking a record that was 50 years old is a really big blessing and it means a lot to me.

Q. Chaz, first NCAA Tournament game didn't seem like you had jitters. How much were you looking forward to it and how do you feel about the success on this stage?

CHAZ LANIER: Yeah, these are the moments you dream of. I want to give the word to God for putting me in this position and my teammates for going out there and getting it done today. Wofford was a very well-coached team, and we were resilient for a full 40 minutes. I'm just excited and super happy for the next round.

Q. Zakai, everybody knows what kind of player Chaz is, but as he was saying it's his first game at this level. Is there anything you needed to tell him or with a guy like Chaz, do you let him be?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: We told him it was going to be tough. But playing in the SEC, you're playing against the best teams in the country every single day, and I thought Chaz was well prepared especially with regard to the regular season. And I just kept telling him you've got to do exactly what you've been doing and keep working for the ball on the court. And he went out there and did an amazing job. I gotta give a lot to the SEC. It was really tough throughout the regular season, and he was really well prepared for it.

Q. Both of you, there were so many points in that game where Wofford tried to wiggle its way back in, got within 8, 9, and just about every time y'all had a quick response. Is that the thing an old team should do in situations like that? Keep calm and keep control?

CHAZ LANIER: Yeah, basketball is a game of runs. We knew there was going to be adversity throughout the game and ups and downs. I feel like we were a well-prepared team, well coached, and I feel like we've been through these before, and we were super resilient.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Wofford is a well-coached team. We knew they were going to go on their runs. But having a lot of older guys on the court at times, we knew we had to stay



calm and stay composed and we did a great job.

Q. Zakai, when you're out there at the start of the game, how much of a benefit is it for guys who have been here before?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Well, you know, I'm not really sure how to answer that. But every single day, you've got to go out there and lace your shoes up. No matter whether we're playing at TBA, playing at Rupp, you've got to go out there and do your job. No matter how many games you got under your belt, you still gotta go out there and do what you do.

Q. Zakai, what's the most underrated thing that people don't recognize about Chaz and how he goes about his game and what he does on the floor?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Me personally how hard he works to get the ball. I feel like a lot of people might foul him time and time, and he works really hard to get the ball. And I'm looking for him and other guys are looking for him, and I feel like how he moves off the ball is very underrated.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys, we appreciate your time. Questions for Coach.

Q. Coach, same thing I asked Zakai, how comfortable is it for you as a coach when you have guards that have played in this tournament so many times before?

RICK BARNES: Again, I go back to us playing Wofford a year ago. Zakai didn't play very much in that game. He was on a time restriction. And I think at halftime it was a 3- or 4-point game, and basically four of those five of those starters are back.

Jahmai, who was outstanding tonight, he led us in rebounding again. He does all the dirty work and all the things that go into winning. He and Zakai kept telling those guys all week how hard it was. You know, we play against a lot of those southern conference teams and we know how good that league is and how competitive it is. So we play those teams some in our nonleague schedule.

But having those guys and having Cade, I thought Cade was good tonight and coming down the stretch. You've got to have that leadership. And I think Jordan Gainey is a part of it, too, now. And you need guard play obviously.

But it's what they do, their demeanor during timeouts, their demeanor at a longer timeout tonight, halftime, and hearing them talk to the guys, that's the leadership that maybe people don't know that that goes on. But we've got maybe some of the best at doing that.

Q. Rick, you mentioned in your opening statement about being impressed with Dwight Perry and his Wofford team, and I know you referenced the game you played against them last season. Can you speak more on what impresses you with his ability to coach and lead his team in his third season?

RICK BARNES: Really, I could sit here all night and rave about Dwight. I'm serious. I mean, a year ago I remember after we played 'em -- and we knew coming in watching them on tape, they really do a lot of movement, like we like to do off the ball. They screen well, they've got really good players that have gotten better since they've been there.

But he plays high percentage basketball and he plays complementary basketball where they're going to make you guard. There's no doubt early -- I'm sure they were hoping that we wouldn't shoot it as well as we did tonight. There was no doubt the way they were playing our outside screens or inside screens.

We were concerned about them. They came into the tournament as hot as any team in the country from the three-point line and we were concerned about that. They got us out of our gaps early. We're normally a heavy gap team, and Dwight took advantage of it early and did what you would think he would do. And they kicked out and hit those threes early, and we had to get out of the gap, then they started driving the ball hard.

Again, I can't say enough about 'em. Terrifically, fundamentally coached, got good players that have bought in and you can tell there is a connection with those players, you can tell it.

Again, coming in, it's always hard to win a game in this tournament, especially when you're thinking about a team that knows you. I mean, I don't think that Wofford came into this game one bit concerned about us being an SEC team, again, because I watched them come into our building a year ago, and they didn't flinch and I knew they wouldn't flinch today.

We had a lead, and I didn't feel comfortable at any point in time until the very end because they fought. They fought us in Knoxville and I knew they would do it here today.

Q. Coach, can you talk about going into the second round, any key take-aways without watching any type of film necessarily, but what did you see with your guys and obviously playing this very good Wofford team, what does that look like moving forward for you all?



RICK BARNES: Well, you know, before we came, obviously like every team here, we've already scouted everybody that we knew that we could possibly play against. Now we got a day to get ready. It will be different. We don't do much physically because we were in a really physical game tonight. I think this game is going to be pretty physical, too, but the key is to get recovered.

We will get focused on it, we will enjoy this for a little bit, get back and go to work on it tomorrow. Know that you are playing against -- anybody in this tournament, they're here at this time because they're playing well. On any given night, forty minutes, it's such a fine line between winning and losing.

You hope that from a scouting standpoint -- again, I think I've got the best coaching staff in the country. They're going to do what they need to do to get our guys ready from that point of view, but we won't know that for a couple more hours.

We will get back and guys will get in those ice tubs and try and get their bodies back because you expect it to be another grind game and hard-fought possession game.

Q. Rick, I know Felix has done it all year, but how important are the screens he sets to get guys like Chaz open like tonight?

RICK BARNES: He does do a good job and tonight he started getting back to running to the rim like the way he did earlier. Those screens -- and, again, those are so important. But tonight we were able to get some lobs to him. Because I thought he really got more aggressive getting off the screen and letting -- when we put Chaz out there on one wing and Jordan, it's hard to tag anywhere.

And then when Jahmai was out there, then he started setting some really good fade screens where Igor hit a three out of it, so kept trying to put him into a tough situation there. And if we can get Felix running to the rim, those are the post baskets we need. He and Cade were a big force tonight, both of 'em, I thought.

Q. Rick, I asked Zakai this, but with a player like Chaz, the things he can do, I think everybody knows by this point, but he hadn't played in this setting before. Did he do enough during the season to make you not worry about the game like this? Do you always wonder in someone's first tournament game?

RICK BARNES: I don't know, maybe sometimes we make it bigger than it really is. I mean, these are young guys that grow up thinking about this. We played in some really loud, hostile arenas and you think that anytime you got a

seed -- low seed or a high seed, most of the time, they start pulling for the dark jerseys, so we've been in those situations on the road.

He's such a wonderful guy. He worked hard. When you work hard at what you do -- and he comes in at -- I understand what you're saying, but I don't know how to answer it. I've seen some guys -- I don't know if I've ever seen a guy as good of a player as him ever be scared of the moment here. I think they kind of embrace it. They really love it. I think he was looking forward to it.

And, again, his demeanor hasn't changed one bit from the first time I met him to today. He has been the same Chaz Lanier in terms of the way he goes about everything that he does. I wasn't concerned about that. I think coaches go into the game always thinking, hey, I hope we can make some shots.

But he's gotten -- I mean, he had five rebounds tonight. He goes back a couple games, now, he's really upped his rebounding game, he's driving the ball better. All those things. It was hard for him to drive tonight the way they started out guarding him. He was coming off of it, and they were in a drop-off of our screening action. But that's why he was able to pull up and get that mid-range jumper a couple times.

I'm always wanting him to come off and shoot threes, but I said you've got to do what you think and he's really comfortable at the mid-range as well.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we appreciate your time. Thank you.

RICK BARNES: Thank you.

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