

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UCLA vs Tennessee

Friday, March 21, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes

Media Conference



RICK BARNES: Well, I was blessed. When I went to George Mason back in 1980, we had a player on our team by the name of Bill Johnson who was good friends with John Wooden and his family. When Coach Wooden's family would go on vacation, Bill would go out and stay with Coach. And later on Coach was -- I'd met him obviously a few times through the John Wooden war with T.J. Ford and Kevin Durant.

But Bill would go out and stay with him, and I went out a couple times. And my son was living out there, and we had a chance to go to Coach's home and spend time in his home with him and talk basketball. Also a number of times I would go to dinner with him.

That was a wonderful experience for me, to get to talk to him, and he was in his 90s. And just hearing so many wonderful stories about his coaching career. So when UCLA called, it was certainly an honor because obviously of the respect growing up. I remember staying up late at night in the '60s when Dick Enberg would come on at 11:30 on east coast time. And they might play once a year. And watching those games and the great run he put together.

But when I got the call, obviously for a lot of reasons I listened and we met, and we talked about the possibility of that. And I just did a radio interview and they asked what I remember most. I remember a lot of prayer. Because I felt really blessed to have had the opportunity to come to Tennessee, and I will forever be thankful to Randy Boyd and when we were in that part of the negotiation, the commitment that he made.

At the time -- again, I look at it now and I thank God that he gave me the guidance to be where I am. And certainly UCLA hired a great, great basketball coach in Mick Cronin, and it's worked out well for him.

I'm just, again, thankful and blessed that I've got the opportunity that I have at Tennessee. And I'm glad it's worked out for UCLA, too, because the people I met with were wonderful people and, again, I don't think there is any question they made the right hire.

Q. Coach, just nuts and bolts UCLA, what jumps out at you? Couple of top things on your scouting report?

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes. Coach?

RICK BARNES: Certainly excited to be here for round two and know that we have really a terrific opponent in UCLA. And Mick has done a great job everywhere he's ever been, and his teams always take on his personality, and this team is no different.

Q. Coach, I asked Bruce Pearl earlier about this. Since it's kinda going to be an SEC takeover tomorrow with Louisville no longer here and Auburn fans in town, Bruce Pearl was adamant that Tennessee fans should root on Auburn tomorrow night since you guys potentially wouldn't play each other until the Final Four. Would you happen to have a message for Auburn fans that are going to be in the building when you guys play?

RICK BARNES: Well, you know, one of my great memories in coaching was actually in this building, back when Villanova, St. John's and Georgetown were in this building and -- I can't remember the other team. But all I remember, the whole Rupp Arena came alive chanting "Big East, Big East". I would like to think that our league is pulling for each other.

Again, we have worked hard as a league to get where we are this year, and it's always tough. But, yeah, I would like to think even as fans that we would all have each other's back this time of year and then we can go back to what we normally do.

Q. Rick, about six years ago, you were involved in the UCLA coaching search. What do you remember about that window of time and the fondness that you had growing up for that program?



RICK BARNES: Well, I think they're obviously -- again, Mick's teams always defend, very good ball pressure team, very good active in the gaps, really good hands, they do a good job with their hands.

They know how they want to play. They're going to -- really good balanced inside-out game. They know who they are, they know what they're looking for.

They, to me, are just an extremely sound, fundamental team.

Q. This is just going to be the second time that UCLA and Tennessee will meet on the men's basketball court. How tough or unique is it that programs with such history are just, you know, meeting with a spot in the Sweet 16 on the line?

RICK BARNES: It is unique. I'd like to someday talk to all those guys from the Pac-12, how they handled all the travel this year and vice versa, the Big Ten going out there. That's a lot of traveling going on.

I think simply east coast, west coast. And probably through the years, a lot of teams didn't do a lot of home and home with that much distance in between. I know at Texas one year, I think we did do a home and home with them, I think. I know we did go to Pauley one time. I can't remember where we played them. I don't remember them coming to campus, but we did go to Pauley one time at Texas.

You would think through all these years that you would, but I just feel that the travel has probably kept them from playing. And you would think somewhere along the line in one of these tournaments, we would have met more than -- this is the second time, but -- did I answer your question?

Okay. I would like to do a home and home with UCLA because of the respect that I have for that program and Mick. It's hard. I think our fans would be excited about them certainly coming to Knoxville and hopefully they would be excited about us coming to Pauley.

Q. Rick, how rare is it to have someone of Felix's size and stature and have to get him ready to play someone who is four or five inches taller than he is?

RICK BARNES: Well, it is what it is. Two totally different players in how they play. But we'll just ask him to do his job the best he can. Obviously, you know, fighting -- the game is so much about space, knowing your space on the court and their space on the court and trying to keep them from getting to that space. It works both ways.

It's been, again, locked in and we've never asked any one player for the most part to defend one-on-one. We believe in our team defense and offensively we need him to -- like yesterday, Felix was responsible for 14 screens that led to Chaz Lanier's points. He did just a fabulous job yesterday screening to get Chaz open. And he got away and had a lob dunk. Actually got fouled on one, he should have been shooting free throws. But if he can get back to doing that for us.

And, again, people are obviously game planning, which takes away a little bit, but we need him to be active for us offensively, and we know that he can protect at the rim regardless of who he is playing against.

Q. Rick, Zakai Zeigler and Mashack of Tennessee, the only team with two of the five finalists for Defensive Player of the Year for the Naismith Award. What is it they do that sets the tone for the style of defense that you like to play and how key are they in that? Nice to see them being recognized for what they've done.

RICK BARNES: It is nice they're being recognized for it, because they do it every day. What you see in a game they do every day in practice, and because of that, it has an effect on their team. Because obviously when we watch practice tape every day, a big part of that -- we're watching the defense side of it. One thing with both of those guys we have never, ever coached is effort. They've always given effort. That's a talent, because not all players play with that type of effort and passion.

They both have -- it's in their DNA. I wish I could give it to everybody where they really understand how important that part of the game is, they understand how to fix so much when their teammates make mistakes, they can cover up. And not only do their job, but their voice is important. If you were with us today, you would have heard them on the court talking about what needed to be done.

But I've watched them do it for four years. Even when they were young coming in, they were high-level competitors, even though they've each grown every year in various ways.

The one thing they both had from the time they walked on campus was a work ethic, a competitive spirit, and a real willingness to want to be coached and coached hard.

Q. Rick, Zakai was asked last night about what he doesn't think people know about Chaz Lanier, and he said how hard Chaz has to work to get the basketball because teams obviously don't want him to have the basketball. When he got to Knoxville, did he already have that from his time at North Florida with people



trying to deny him or did he have to learn how hard he would have to work to get space?

RICK BARNES: One, he came from a program where he was really well coached. But we play a little bit different style where we do a lot of -- we do some ball screening, but we do a lot of movement cutting away from the ball where we like to move without it.

I think the person that has probably helped him as much as anybody is Jordan Gainey. Jordan went through it a year ago and Jordan has learned how to really cut, play with pace.

I think that Chaz probably leads the nation in shirts pulled out. I've never -- his shirt tail is always out because he has learned to really cut, move, and he's going to get down. They're going to down him. And what that means is they're going to try to face guard him and keep him from cutting to the ball. He's learned how to handle that and he's learned how to use it to his advantage.

He's also gotten better really in the last three weeks knowing how to read not just his man, but where the help defender might be when he receives the screen. And he's taking it to the basket more so. But he's really improved.

The neat thing about him, we're not going to see his best basketball because he's just getting started. You think about how much he's improved this year and how much he's really improved in the last month, it's really pretty remarkable. It's really been neat coaching him because we've expected a lot from him, and he's come in and has been just a great teammate. He's never made it about himself. He's wanted to be defensively -- he's probably underestimated as a defensive player. Because, again, I think he's done as good a job as any incoming player as a transfer to ask Jahmai Mashack and Zakai Zeigler and even Jordan Gainey, how do I handle this defensively?

And that's, again, we've got a group of guys like that which has made this group fun to coach.

THE MODERATOR: We appreciate your time, Coach.

RICK BARNES: Thank you all.

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