

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Spectrum Center

Tennessee Volunteers

Rick Barnes

Josiah-Jordan James

Santiago Vescovi

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Here with the student-athletes from Tennessee, Josiah-Jordan James and Santiago Vescovi. How did I do?

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: That's right.

Q. For both you guys, you've been with Coach for so long. Does the fact that he's playing Texas tomorrow, does that mean anything to you guys because of his history, or is it just another game in between the Sweet 16?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: For Coach, he definitely doesn't make it bigger than it is. He has no hard feelings towards that university. For us, we kind of take it upon ourselves to make things right with him because we know this is a huge game for him, even though he doesn't want it to be.

We want to come out with a victory, and obviously in this part of the season, it's win or go home. Obviously they're just another team in the way, but the UT versus UT rivalry is something that's new and we're excited about, and we love winning.

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: Same thing Joe said. We know that this point of the year you either win or go home. Texas is just another opponent that we have in front. I think we're going to need everybody like we had last game where everybody played hard every second they stepped on the court, and we're going to need that out of every single person.

Q. Josiah and Santiago, when you guys look at what



happened in Indianapolis two years ago when you had an opportunity to advance, do you all two guys that have kind of been around the program, do you look back at those kind of moments to try to teach the current guys that are on the roster maybe what you all did wrong back then compared to maybe what you could do right now?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I would think, you try to learn a lot from losses, especially in a setting like this, but I feel like everybody in that locker room knows what's at stake and knows the sense of urgency we have to play with.

I'm proud of the way we came out the last 40 minutes, and I know for a fact that, if we come out with that sense of urgency, that sense of aggressiveness for 40 minutes, we'll put ourselves in a very good position to win.

Really it helps having that experience. Even though we lost, experience is always the best teacher. We try to share that experience with other guys, but I feel like everybody from top to bottom is locked in.

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: Most important, I think -- because that game, of course, we lost and we can learn a lot from that, but it was two years ago. I think the biggest teacher at this point is probably the two last games that we had against Kentucky at the SEC Tournament.

Especially the SEC Tournament one because it gave us a feeling that we definitely don't want to feel anymore. If we feel that again, it means our season is over.

Just to understand, like Joe was saying, the sense of urgency we've got to play with. I think it's easier to look back to those games that happened recently and everybody was involved. Even though we can tell them about what happened two years ago, I think the biggest teacher we're going to have.

Q. I'm sure there's a lot of positive takeaways from the game yesterday, but what were some of the things the coaches were telling you guys needed to be improved?



JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I would just say taking care of the ball. Obviously going against a team like Texas, they score a lot in transition. They get a lot of points off turnovers. So just being better with taking care of the ball and then defensive rebounding. Just holding teams to one possession. So those two aspects for sure.

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: Yeah, same thing. Taking care of the ball, playing hard on defense like we did. And they're a very physical team. So just got to play hard on both ends of the floor. Then box out and go and get the offensive rebound.

Q. You guys have been around for what has been maybe the best stretch of Tennessee basketball all time. How important would it for you two, as you kind of wrap this up, to, one, get the next step of getting back to a second straight Sweet 16 tomorrow, but I know you have higher goals in mind, and to finish it off that way?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Our goal when we came together in the summer, we got everybody together for our first team meeting, we talked about making history. We knew we had collective guys and collective group that could be a part of it, and we worked endlessly and tirelessly to get to this point.

The buck doesn't stop here. We want bigger and better things. We want to leave this place better than we found it. We've had a lot of success and a lot of wins, but this time right in front of us is the most important. We know the next 40 minutes could be our last 40 minutes, if we don't come out with a sense of urgency.

We've just got to take it one game at a time. I know, if we do that and come in with the right mindset, we can make history in this program.

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: Same thing. Joe nailed it. Just got to come out with that sense of urgency, know that this is the most fun part of the year. And we've just got to play with that chip on our shoulder that we know we can do, and just go out and give all our effort every second on the court.

I think every guy in the last game did that. Everybody that stepped on the court played really hard and did what they were supposed to. I think, if we do that, we're going to put ourselves in a great position to win.

Q. Josiah, being at Tennessee for how long that you have been there and with Rick Barnes, looking back on it now, maybe your first year, first semester at Tennessee, do you think you guys kind of laid a

foundation when it comes to getting the basketball program back in that right direction? Even when Rick was hired at Tennessee and then you arrived when you did, it just seemed like it stabilized the program a little bit. Can you talk about those early years that you were there compared to where you are now?

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I'm not sure how the program did like prior to Coach Barnes and his first couple years. I just know my time there from my last five years. I can't really say it was me and Santi solely. We had leaders of like Jordan Bowden, Lamonte Turner, John Fulkerson, Yves Pons, guys who were on that 2018-2019 team who were a really talented groups.

They were great leaders for us, and once those guys left, the weight was on our shoulders as leaders. I think we've done a great job of upholding the standard and having Tennessee be the standard of SEC basketball. In this tournament, we're trying to make Tennessee the standard of all college basketball and try to be the last team standing.

Q. I guess I'll follow up to the earlier question. How much did you guys hear after last week for all your wins, people talking about, they haven't won in March as much as they'd like to and then losing on Friday. Do you take that personally?

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: You've got to understand, once we get in a position like we are where there's a lot of eyes watching you, there's a lot of that stuff you've got to kind of channel it out. I don't think any of our guys are paying attention to what other people are saying.

You're always going to have both ends. People are going to go against you. People are going to go with you. We know what we're here to do. I think the team has prepared the best way we can. I think it showed the first game we played yesterday, and we've just got to keep it rolling now.

At the end of the day, we're the ones on the court. Yeah, we've just got to keep playing hard like we're doing.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Our motto since this tournament has started and kind of leading up to the SEC Tournament, it's just us. It's hard to, but we're trying our best to block out all the outside noise. Obviously we know that we haven't had the success that we wanted to in the past years. The only way we can fix it is by accepting the challenge we have in front of us and playing the next 40 minutes like it's the championship game.

Obviously, would we have wanted to do better in past tournaments? Obviously, that's 100 percent. All we can

do is accept the challenge we have now and try to be our best in this moment.

Q. Josiah, you talked about that motto, "it's just us." Can you expand on what that entails.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Everybody in our locker room from top to bottom in our organization is all we need. Coach has talked about it from day one. Everybody in that locker room, we have everything we need to be successful and to be the last team standing.

So just relying on each other, having a selfless attitude and competing on a daily basis. Relying on our daily habits that we started in the summertime that we relied on to get to this point in the season.

We don't have to come to this tournament and be anybody that we're not and do things we haven't done up to this point. We're one of the best teams, if not the best team, in the country, and we've gotten that way by doing what we do and relying on the group that we have.

THE MODERATOR: Santiago, what does that mean to you, "just us"?

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: Same thing Josiah just said.

Q. For either of you, Santi, you mentioned Texas being a physical team. How physical do you expect this game to be tomorrow? Do you expect it to be a very physical game?

SANTIAGO VESCOVI: Yeah, for sure. This is going to be the third time we play them in three years, so we kind of know each other at this point. Yeah, they're a team that plays really hard. They're a very talented team. Got to give them a lot of credit. They're going to play hard. We know it's going to be a physical battle.

I don't have any doubt any of our guys are not going to be up to the standard. I think everybody's going to do their job. We're a physical team as well. So it's going to come down to the wire, and I think both teams are going to be real physical tomorrow.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I think going into the game they're going to know what we're going to run, we're going to know what they're going to run. It's not going to come down to X's and O's, but it's going to come down who is the more physical team.

Like Santi said, we played them three years straight. If you go back to those games where they won in Texas, they were more physical for the majority of the game, and they

won. Go back to the game last year in Knoxville, we were more physical from start to finish, and we were able to pull out the victory.

We know it doesn't come down to game plan. It just comes down to toughness and physicality in the end.

Q. Coach, I know it's going back a while, but I just wanted to ask. When you got to Tennessee from Texas in those first couple years you were in the program, how would you characterize it? Do you feel like it was a stabilization of the Tennessee athletic department compared to where maybe things are now? With the different ADs and where the football program was and the basketball program, do you feel like you set a foundation of where things maybe are now? I'm not trying to put it all on your back.

RICK BARNES: Dave Hart interviewed me back in 1985 or '86, when I was an assistant at Ohio State and he was an Associate AD at East Carolina getting ready to become the AD, and we had known each other through that and me in the ACC.

Actually before the final week or so that I was at Texas, we had started talking a little bit indirectly. So Dave, when he hired me, he said, we really need to be able to program. He said we have good teams here. We've got a great tradition. We're looking for stability. We're looking for consistency.

I can tell you our first year there we struggled with our fan base. I grew up three hours from Knoxville. I had no idea the support the volunteers got, not only in basketball, but in football, in every sport. It's truly amazing. I've never been around a fan base like what we have. That was kind of my marching orders to do that.

So we set out to do that. We targeted some young guys we wanted to go after and tried to bring in five or six guys we were going to build around, and we were able to do that and got it going. As you mentioned, there's been some different ADs in and out, once Dave stepped away from it.

This administration is the best I've ever been around when you think about Randy Boyd as the president of our UT system, and Donde Plowman, I've never been around anybody on campus that's led the way she has. Danny White was the first AD hired by the president and the chancellor, and what he has done in the time that he's done it, you talk about a makeover, it's amazing what he's done and what he's done for every sport.

He said, we want to be one of the best in the country, and I've got to do my job to get the budget where it needs to be,

facilities and all that, and they have worked night and day to do that.

Tennessee, I'm telling you, it's a special place. It really is. I said it last night. I've been blessed from the time I've gotten there. It's just all around from a university standpoint, I can't imagine there's a better place in the country right now to be associated with.

Q. Rick, you alluded to this last night. Rodney Terry was just talking about it. If you think back to 2001-2002, Rodney was at UNC-Wilmington. Kelvin Sampson offers him a job at Oklahoma. He turns it down. He said it was at the advice of Frank Haith. What do you remember of that situation at that time when you were wanting to bring Rodney on?

RICK BARNES: One thing I've always done since the time I've been able to be head coach, I've always relied on my assistant coaches to help hire who we hire because I think the chemistry of the staff is certainly one of the most important things. Frank had been with me, and I'd known Frank.

He was talking about Rodney. They were friends. He just always talked and said, hey, if we ever get a chance to hire someone, a young guy that I think is really, really good is Rodney. But I do remember that Frank told me that he -- Frank did ask me what would happen if Rodney took the Oklahoma job. I just said out of my relationship and my respect for Kelvin -- Kelvin and I have known each other forever. I said I wouldn't do that. That's just the way I thought at that time.

Then a year later, we had an opening, and Rodney was the only guy we really talked to about it and hired him.

Q. I know last season obviously you all showed you could make a run in this tournament without Zakai when he was injured. With him back now controlling things the way that he does, how much more security does that give you as a coach mentally going into games in this tournament?

RICK BARNES: Z has been such a huge part of our -- I've said it many times, when we recruited him, we thought we were going to redshirt him. After two days, we thought maybe we should redshirt Kennedy. From the time he walked on campus, we had no idea.

We knew he'd been good that last week at the Peach Jam. We really had no idea he was going to do that. His DNA has impacted our program more than any player than since we've been at Tennessee, maybe anybody I've coached. What he does and what you see him do out there, he's

doing it every day in practice.

Yeah, when you've got a guy that you know is going to play like that and give it to you every night and he's going to be a guy that his teammates totally respect, I guess as a coach going to the game, the biggest thing is you hope he doesn't get into foul trouble and doesn't get hurt because he means so much to us.

Q. Even though you're on different parts of the bracket, I want to ask you about your friendship with Tom Izzo, how it's grown over the years. Specifically if you recall or what you recall about your trip to Kuwait together for Hoops For Troops. Tom mentioned you guys had a lot of time to bond on the way over.

RICK BARNES: In this business, we're kind of the same era. Tom is -- we met in Columbus, Ohio, when he was an assistant at Michigan State. I was an assistant at Ohio State and since that time. Then we went on the trip, and that was a great trip for so many of us.

Going over there, we all loved it. You talk about coaching, and we had teams and we're trying to win it as much as we possibly could. I remember that was the first time in Ohio.

The next time I saw Tom we were in Detroit, and I watched a high school game in Detroit, and I went over to watch this young guy play. Tom walked in with Jud Heathcote. I'm watching this guy shoot some air balls, and I don't even know if Tom remembers this. I kept hearing Jud say, you've got me here seeing this guy? I'm watching this guy, and he makes a couple of threes and shoots another air ball. I remember Jud Heathcote saying, you bring Gary Williams up here, he will fire you.

I go back and tell Gary, Gary said, what do you think about the kid, and I told him. He said, well, I'm not going to go see him play. I didn't realize until years later that I was set up because it was Steve Smith. Jud and Tom, one of them set me up. I did learn a lesson not to listen to other people.

But Tom, we played the last two years in a closed scrimmage, and we played the exhibition game this year for the Maui relief fund. He loves it. You can't help but be around him. He cares so much about the game. Our friendship has been there for a long time, and I think it always will be.

Q. I know when the brackets come out you're not supposed to look ahead, but it's human nature that you do. When you see Texas in your path, what do you do? Do you roll your eyes like I'd rather it be someone else because of the connections there? Or what goes through your mind when you see them

potentially in your path to the Final Four?

RICK BARNES: I will tell you this, when the bracket came out, honestly all I looked at was St. Pete. I tell our team, as soon as the meeting is over with, we come out and talk about this four-team tournament here in Charlotte. Again, I said it last night. I have yet to look at the full bracket, but for some reason, when our number came up, I'm like will it be Clemson, or will it be Texas?

I don't know if they do that intentionally. I don't know. But it's always tough playing people that you know that know you -- we know each other. There's not going to be a lot of secrets now. We've been around each other, all of us. You look at his staff, there's a lot of guys on that staff that have been a big part of my career. I'm just blessed that I was able to spend that time with them.

I think in all honesty, do you want to match up with your friends -- like talking about Tom, I don't particularly look forward to that. Even though we didn't work together, we've known each other longer than I've known anybody on that staff. I don't look forward to it, but we all know we have a job to do, and when we toss it up, we're going to try to do what we do, and that's try to win a basketball game.

Q. Just wondering if you've been able to watch or enjoy at all what D.J. Burns has been doing lately with NC State. Also just what you remember from his time in your program.

RICK BARNES: One, he's got a wonderful family. Obviously we thought D.J. could be a player. There's no doubt, or we wouldn't have offered him the scholarship when we did.

If you really want to see D.J., you should get with my strength and conditioning coach. He has a picture on his phone when he left Tennessee, you wouldn't recognize him. D.J., just like he does now, practice. He can score, he's got great hands, knew how to get the ball where he wanted to do it.

One thing that I really respect about D.J., even when he left, he would often send texts back to people just saying how much he learned while he was at Tennessee, and he understands more now than he did then, which it happens. It really does.

When he left, went to Winthrop, I thought he got some great people around him. Again, he's got a wonderful family. I'm not surprised because the guy knows how to score the basketball, and he knows, whether you want to say he's in shape or out of shape, he knows what he's doing when he's out there and he knows how to get around

and be effective. So I'm not really surprised by it.

Q. Just how comforting is it entering a game like this to have Jahmai Zakai on the defensive end?

RICK BARNES: Again, it's going to be more than those two. Certainly Max can get going. We recruited Tyrese. We know what he's capable of obviously. Dylan Disu was in our league for a little bit and recruited Dylan. We know their personnel obviously.

One, it's going to be very -- they're going to play extremely hard, expecting to be out there just like they did last night. They did a great job of really forcing their physicality, I thought, on Colorado State, and I expect pretty much the same thing.

So we'll have to be ready and have a number of different guys that can try to guard those guys.

Q. Coach, you guys are so detailed in your scouts in the regular season, when you get to this time of year with the quick turnarounds, how much can you really get into the details versus how much you try to be the best version of yourself?

RICK BARNES: I think they would say the same thing. They probably have seen a lot of the stuff that we've seen, and we do some similar things, I mean, some things we've used in the past, Rodney does. So some of it, you'll be familiar with.

I mean, we have today, and I think this time, the biggest thing you want, you want your guys as fresh as you can keep them both mentally and physically. You want to obviously make sure everybody's healthy.

We'll have time. It's different in terms of maybe the speed that you would normally work with getting ready, and you won't do that as much because, again, you want them to be as fresh as they can come gametime.

We'll get it covered. We started on them today like we normally will with whoever we played, and we'll have all day today to have what we need to do, and we always do. We'll have tomorrow to do the same thing.

Q. Rick, both Santi and Josiah just spoke about the importance of being aggressive and physical in every game, but especially in this game against Texas. Are those the two biggest keys you look for when a game starts to see if your team has it and brought it that day if they live up to those two areas?

RICK BARNES: I think the first four minutes of games are



extremely important. I think that you do -- coaches, when we start, we're all sitting around thinking, are we going to be ready mentally, physically? Are we going to shoot the ball well and all of that?

Tom and I were actually talking a little bit this morning, and he made a great comment. He said, there's nights when people don't think you play well, you play really well, but you don't shoot well. There's nights when you shoot well that you don't play real well. Shooting makes up for a multitude of sins sometimes.

At the start of the game, you're looking for the details because you know early in the game what you've talked about and you want to make sure. With that said, you've got to be prepared for them to come with something else, a little tweak here and there you want to see your players on the edge. You want to see them locked into the details that you talked about and know that -- I think this time of year we all have a pretty good idea of what you'd better expect. If you don't, you won't be here very long.

Q. You mentioned Zakai, the DNA a lot with Zakai. What does that look like? We see the things on the court, but what does that look like off the court, in the locker room, the bus, things like that? How does that translate to the team?

RICK BARNES: What you see on the court is what we see on the court every day. He's going to go at it. He's no different. That's why I think he's consistent because he does it every day.

His teammates, they love him because -- I mean, that's hard to do. You talk about mental toughness, to be able to bring it every day and do what he does. He's fearless. I think he's been through a lot more stuff, difficulties, things off the court in his life, more so than anything on the court. I think he takes nothing for granted.

He's always been a fighter. You talk to his mom, and from the time he was small, he didn't run from it. He embraced it. He's fearless and really competitive.

One of his biggest faults is, when he's not going well, he's too hard on himself. He really expects it. You watch this -- like if you were at -- tomorrow when you have a shootaround or today at the end, I can assure you, when we're done, he'll be one of the last guys that will still be there shooting. He's a guy that's going to come back and put his time in.

If you watch how he went through his rehabilitation from a year ago to get his knee right, it tells you a lot about him too because he thought he could play two months before

they let him play. It's just his mental makeup. It's infectious. I think it's rubbed off on some guys.

Again, he's meant more to this program than people can even imagine because talking about the little things in the locker room and all that. I think, when he walks in the locker room, he's the same every day.

One of the great things about him is he is consistent. I've never seen him in a bad mood other than when he gets mad at himself. I've learned to tweak him a little bit to where he'll get mad at me. But I love the guy. I don't know what it will be like now not having him because he's been such an important part of our team.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports