

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Final - Tennessee vs Purdue

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

**Tennessee Volunteers**

**Rick Barnes**

**Jordan Gainey**

**Dalton Knecht**

**Jahmai Mashack**

**Josiah-Jordan James**

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference



**Q. Coach Barnes, I heard in the background you were telling a lot of stories about relationships with different coaches. Coach Kampe was here supporting you. Now you're in the Elite Eight. Talk about the support you're getting from coaches around the country at this stage.**

**RICK BARNES:** People would be surprised just how many coaches we have really terrific relationships. Again, I've been doing it a long time and have had a chance to be around a lot of good people. I've really enjoyed watching what Matt Painter's done to his program, how he's built it and what he's done to the consistency with it.

This time of year you'll get texts from different people and all that, which I think every coach does. Again, having a chance to continue to play in a tournament that's hard to advance through and get to this point is something that, again, these guys -- we're all proud of it, but we'd like to be able to keep moving, and it's going to take a great effort to do that.

**Q. Coach, before the Sweet 16 matchup, Matt Painter kind of talked about his group around Zach Edey. Obviously it's a short scout. You've played them before. The focal point's going to be the reigning National Player of the Year. But what do you see from those guys around Zach Edey maybe that makes this Purdue team better than other ones you've seen before?**

**RICK BARNES:** He got in foul trouble over there, and those guys were the ones that did the damage. He's got really great support around him, a cast of guys that they know each other. They run extremely well. They know how to play together. They know when to -- he's a great run stopper in Zach Edey. He's a guy that, when you get something going, they can slow down, they know how to get him the ball, and he knows where he wants to catch the ball.

Again, Matt has done just a terrific job of putting the pieces around him that has got them to where they've been all year, which is basically the No. 1 team in the country, or 1, 2 team in the country, and the success he's had the past

**THE MODERATOR:** Good afternoon. We're pleased to be joined by the 2nd seeded Tennessee Volunteers.

From your left to your right, we are joined by head coach Rick Barnes, Jordan Gainey, Dalton Knecht, Jahmai Mashack, and Josiah-Jordan James.

**RICK BARNES:** Obviously we're excited to be here and going up against a team that we played earlier in the year over in Honolulu. So they're familiar with us, we're familiar with them.

Going back to looking at that tape last night, both teams have improved a lot since then. It was a really hard-fought game over there, a lot of fouls called in the game. I don't think there will be that many called here.

Again, I'm really excited for these guys to have a chance and go back and play Purdue again.

**Q. Dalton, what do you do with the film of the first game? Do you think you take a lot from that, or is it just a completely different situation?**

**DALTON KNECHT:** Yeah, I definitely will watch that film with Coach Barnes and stuff, and watch how they guided the gaps. I remember they turned me over quite a bit in the second half by getting in those gaps. So I just have to be ready for that and kick it out to my teammates earlier.



couple of years.

It's more difficult than you think, when you've got a guy as dominant as Zach is, to get those guys to understand how it's got to be played, but he's done a terrific job doing it.

**Q. Rick, you talked about Matt's program building, and I think you both kind of are similar in kind of maybe defying the odds of what you're supposed to be able to do these days with program building. Why does it work? A lot of people would argue that you guys are old school and it's not the way of the world anymore.**

RICK BARNES: Again, people can look at it any way they want, but I think that coaches, first of all, have to stay true to themselves in terms of what they believe in and their core values. You can't get away from that.

There's no doubt that he is a player development type coach. We pride ourselves on the same thing. I was talking earlier with someone how much Josiah, Santi, in the time they've been with us, has improved, and certainly has Zakai, but everybody on our team, I think we've all improved from the beginning of the year.

I just think you've got to be willing to make the adjustments from year to year that you look at your program, what do you need? We believe, like we think we have a terrific freshman class that, when these older guys leave and their time's up, that they're going to be able to slide in there. That's what we've tried to build our program on.

Obviously these two guys to my left, we knew we needed to get offense out of the portal last year, and we were able to do that. I think, again, we're going to continue to do what we think has been successful for us.

**Q. Josiah, just with Zakai, just because of where he was in November when you guys played the first time, how much different are you guys as a team, how much better?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: He was just coming back from his ACL injury. He was kind of hesitant. He wasn't really himself. We didn't really expect him to be. He's had a lot of experience up until this point. He's definitely exceeded the expectations that we had, and he's playing his best basketball right now.

He's the leader. He's the engine that gets us going. So we'll rely on him heavily, and they'll see a different Zakai Zeigler come tomorrow.

**Q. Josiah, both these teams, Purdue and Tennessee both, are on the same quest. Tennessee's never been**

**to a Final Four, and it's been a long time for Purdue. What's been the demeanor, as somebody who's been with Tennessee for your whole career, in the locker room as you've progressed on this quest? How have the players handled it?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Obviously being grateful for the position that we're in, for the group of guys that we have, but knowing that we want something even better. We want to be the last team standing.

So being able to be proud of where we're at and taking steps forward to that, but also knowing that it doesn't end here and having more hunger and more fight in wanting to make history and be that last team standing.

**Q. Jahmai, how do you feel the post play on this team has improved since that trip to Hawaii?**

JAHMAI MASHACK: I definitely feel like it's improved a lot. I think it's given Tobe and Jonas, our SEC play has given them a lot of experience to guard a lot of really good post players. I think that's something we didn't have when we played them the first time.

I think it's important, it's easier said than done, but I think they're really getting a lot better at positioning themselves, pushing the bigs off the block, making sure they're physical but without fouling, and just making sure they're staying between him and the basket.

It's going to make it easier for the guards -- easier for the bigs if we pressure the ball as guards and get into the basketball. But I definitely feel like they've improved a lot since the beginning of the year, and I think that's another thing that's going to be a focal point in this game, and people are going to see how much better they got from then to now.

**Q. For a player of Zach Edey's size to log the minutes that he does, what does it say about just the level of conditioning, the preparation that he put in for this season?**

RICK BARNES: I think, when you look at Zach Edey from a coach's standpoint and players too, you appreciate when someone gets better the way he has. He's gotten better and better every year. He runs. We like to think you could get guys tired, but I think he moves extremely well.

I think that's the difference in where he was a couple years ago. He's really been able to move. He's a good screener, but he knows exactly on the court where he wants to get his space and where he wants to set up, and they do a great job of getting it to him when he gets there.



But his improvement is what's really impressive. I think the first time we played them, I think he missed a lot of free throws, if I remember. I think he missed a bunch. I wish he'd do it again. But there was a lot of fouls in that game. I think they shot 48 free throws. I think we shot a bunch too.

He's just improved. That's what you admire about him. You admire players that get better from year to year.

**Q. Rick, as a fan of the game, can you at all appreciate this matchup, Dalton and Edey, two All-American players, two programs desperately seeking a Final Four? Can any part of you kind of enjoy that?**

RICK BARNES: Well, when I look at that, I think that Purdue and Tennessee, those guys are great basketball players, but their supporting cast -- I'm not sure if I'd call it a supporting cast, they're teammates -- are just as valuable.

Last night I thought that Zakai and Jahmai and Josiah especially, their leadership, their demeanor at the beginning of the game last night was exactly what we needed. When I look at Purdue, they've got the same thing with their key guys.

I don't think anybody's here because of -- certainly Dalton has made a big impact on our basketball team, and Zach Edey, he's had the spotlight on him forever. But it's two really balanced teams that have depth, that I think you're going to see -- because we've played a lot of people over there. I think we played 10 or 11 people because we got in such foul trouble.

Both teams really, they're more than just the main event that you're talking about. Those guys, they deserved every honor that they've gotten, but both of them would tell you that they would defer to their teammates for helping them get what they've gotten done.

**Q. Jordan, I think you hit a three in the first game that tied the game, and Dalton hit a late three to cut it to the three. What do you have to do in this matchup to finish strong and for it to work out in your favor?**

JORDAN GAINEY: Really just stick to the script the whole entire game. Really make sure we don't give them easy points and they don't get to the free-throw line. Like Coach said, there was a lot of fouls called that game. So just making sure we stay solid and making it tough and nothing's easy in the paint for them.

**Q. Coach, can you give us an update on Santi?**

RICK BARNES: He looked better today. He's with us. We won't obviously do very much today. We'll just see really more so tomorrow, I think once we get going. We expect him to be ready.

**Q. Jordan and Dalton, just as transfers, is there a game comfort level this time of year compared to maybe when you first played Purdue?**

JORDAN GAINEY: With games at this high level, as games go on, you get more comfortable within the play and just starting to get the feel of the game. Just to be able to have my teammates here giving me support through the entire game and make sure I'm staying confident and doing whatever I need to do on the court is just amazing. Big shoutout to those guys.

**Q. Josiah, just how different is it from hearing about Zach Edey to now having experience dealing with him on the court?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: I feel like experience is the best teacher. We have 40 minutes to play against him and his entire team, and we'll go back -- watching that film, we weren't at our best. We've grown a lot, but they have as well.

Just turning down on the turnovers and staying within our principles on the defensive end will be huge. They have a really, really good team. It's going to be a physical battle, but we're more than up to the challenge.

**Q. Josiah, along those terms, we were talking a lot about fouls. That's what Zach Edey does, he leads the nation in fouls drawn. What can you guys do collectively to not get in foul trouble?**

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: Like Jahmai said, our post players, J.P., Jonas, and Tobe have grown so much. Shack also guarded him a little bit as well. They've grown so much, and like you said, SEC play has prepared us for a guy like him.

Obviously it's easier said than done, but just making sure we stay between him and the basket on all their guys is huge because it wasn't just him getting to the foul line. We kind of didn't stick to the script, looking back on that film from the first game. So just making sure no matter what happens, if they go on a run, just staying with the game plan that we have in place.

**Q. You used your opening statement, and then a question about Edey to reference twice all the fouls called in that first game. Are you kind of sending a message to the officials tomorrow?**



RICK BARNES: Well, based on the way the tournament is being called, about half of those fouls wouldn't have been called, I can assure you of that.

But it's early in the year. I've said all along the hardest thing about -- when you start like we do every year, I've always thought we should be able to play more exhibition games to give referees a chance to get more experience before you get thrown into -- like the Maui tournament this year, think of it, it was loaded. Some of the referees there hadn't been in those type games in, what, six months.

Both teams played hard. If you go back and watch that, it was hard fought, that tournament was from start to finish. At the time, referees are getting started, we're getting started. Did we foul? Yeah, we fouled some. Did they foul some? Yeah, they fouled some too. Did the referees miss some? Yeah, they missed some too.

But that was everybody getting started, and you really kind of expect that early in the year.

**Q. Dalton, near the end of the regular season in SEC play, you had some really high-scoring games. Then the SEC Tournament, one-and-done there. How have you found a balance between getting your teammates involved and looking for your own shot because it seemed like in the NCAA Tournament that's been a better balance for you guys offensively.**

DALTON KNECHT: I would just say reading the secondary defender and seeing how my one dribble affects I could get a wide open shot versus my teammates getting a wide open shot. So I would say reading that secondary defender, and I got trust in all my teammates and have the confidence in them to go up and shoot the three and knock it down.

**Q. A lot of questions obviously about Zach Edey, but he's got to get the ball. What's kind of the art of attacking the post feed to him? How much do you fall back on the last game and just on your general principles on how to handle that?**

RICK BARNES: The art of it, it's got to be a team defense. Again, he's a terrific player. Again, I admire anybody that knows where his space is to work and works hard to get there. Again, Matt has some great schemes to not let you see the same thing over and over, but he knows what he's looking for, his teammates knows where he needs to get it, when he needs to get it.

So with that said, it takes five guys being connected defensively. Jahmai talked about ball pressure, important,

because they're such a good passing team, if you don't try to take their vision away a little bit, they're going to put it on the dime on time. But it's taken all five guys to stay connected and work to try to make it as tough as possible.

Because he's going to get his points. He's too good a player. He understands his space so well. One of the hardest things to do is to keep him off the offensive boards. He's a hard guy to guard when he misses his own shot.

It's just a talent. He's good at it. But it's a very difficult -- there's not a drill for that. I wish there were, but there's not. Great hands, and he's right there at the rim. When they come off, he's got a great way of getting it back and putting it back in.

He does a great job rebounding too. You've got to try to keep him from getting too close because he can get his hands on so many balls and slap them out. He's a hard cover. He really is.

**Q. Rick, Pat Summitt used to say that this round, the Elite Eight, may very well be the toughest round in the tournament because everyone is trying to get to the Final Four. You've been there obviously. Do you think that might be the case?**

RICK BARNES: I think they're all tough. First of all, getting into tournament stuff, it's a grind to get there every year, but getting started, because of the pressure of being in it and you know your people around you, you feel it, especially for guys that haven't been there.

Yet we've seen the magical runs by teams, the upsets and all that now with every seed winning a game at some point. Then the next one -- so they're all difficult.

The one thing is you continue to move. You know you're playing against a team that's playing well or they wouldn't be where they are. Again, you'd like to think that most teams right now are playing at an extremely high level and hope that we can continue to do that.

**Q. How have you seen the Tennessee athletic department leadership and the commitment to basketball evolve over your nine years?**

RICK BARNES: It's been great. When Dave Hart hired me, the one thing he did say to me, he said, I'd like for you to really build a program, a program that we can watch grow. Obviously, I think when you talk about building a program, you're talking about consistency, having a chance to be in the fight every year, and having a chance to be highly competitive.



Certainly in the league that we're in, we've been given the resources, but from the time that Dave left, we've had different leadership, not just in the athletic department, but at the top of the university. I don't think there's a university in the country right now that has the leadership we have with Randy Boyd as our president of the UT system, and what Donde Plowman has done on campus is phenomenal. Danny White coming in, I don't know he's done it but he has totally transformed so much around our athletic program and our facilities.

So they deserve a lot of credit for setting the tone of where they want the University of Tennessee to be.

**Q. Rick, you've known Santi for a while obviously. What have the past few days in your interactions with him, how tough has it been on him, especially with everything that happened in the fall?**

RICK BARNES: Well, he was sick. You just had to look at him. We obviously tried to quarantine him as quick as we could to keep him away from the team, but when we were around him and he was seeing everything we were doing by Zoom in his room, knowing if there's any way possible -- Santi, as you guys know, has a great basketball IQ, and he knows what we're doing as well as I know what we're trying to get done.

He just couldn't. He did break the fever, and we thought he was going to be okay, then the fever came back. But you could tell, just when we were around him, he looked like he had no energy. We hate it for him because he's been such a huge part of the program and obviously is. I just hope today he feels like he's got some energy back.

**Q. What does it say about the state of college basketball that Zach and Dalton have both risen to the top under such unique and unheralded starts?**

RICK BARNES: I think -- again, I don't know Zach Edey that well, but just watching him and listening to him and knowing what I know about Matt -- and I know Dalton obviously now after being with him for a year. Humility.

They have great humility and the fact that -- again, when Dalton came on his visit, he didn't ask about a big NIL. He didn't talk about that. He didn't talk about starting. He just said, I just want to be part of a program where players get better. I want to be around players that want to win. I want to help be part of an NCAA team and make a run in March, and I want to be coached hard.

Just watching Zach Edey and how he's improved and knowing what I know about Matt, I think the word I would use with both of them is humility.

**Q. I'm just curious, how much are you kind of allowing yourself to enjoy this in the moment, maybe more so than you did 20 years ago, knowing now how difficult it is to get here?**

RICK BARNES: Well, yeah, you're right. Years ago I know I didn't enjoy it as much because I wanted to keep going further and further, and with that maybe in some ways put more pressure on guys than maybe they should have.

I do know this, it's a players' game. I know when we're at this point we've done a lot -- like today there's not a lot to be done right now other than hopefully we can get great rest.

But I've never been able to really enjoy it a lot until it's over with. I got back last night, went to bed at 3:00, woke up at 5:00. Just thinking, my mind not -- I think that's probably true of most coaches when you're this time of year. Then my first thought was, when I saw those guys, I asked them how much sleep they got because it was -- like I said last night, I thought we were playing Friday, Sunday, but we're playing Saturday, Sunday really.

When you're in the midst of it, it's hard because you've just got to let it go real quick and get to the next. You're obviously concerned about every one of your players. But you do have that feeling quickly after a win, there's a -- I don't even know if I'd say it's relief or whatever, but the fact that you're excited for those guys, and yet excited for everyone involved. And your mind quickly shifts to what's next.

**Q. You're talking about building a program. Just curious for some thoughts on kind of the impact and the imprint obviously of Coach Summitt and the women's program at your school for all those years?**

RICK BARNES: I was fortunate enough to know Pat. She and I were on the Converse committee together. We used to do a lot of clinics. One thing I really admired about her, we'd be at these clinics, she would sit on them and listen, and she always asked questions, and we talked about it.

Then we also used the Baden basketball, so we were around each other. She loved talking basketball. She loved it. She was a basketball coach. But yet what she built and has built has sustained at the University of Tennessee, and the fact that it was a program that was built on work, again, hearing the stories there.

And I've watched how hard Kellie Harper's worked. Think about it. I think they're the only team that's gone to every

single NCAA Tournament, which is unthinkable really, and to do what they've done with the kind of pressure that's been there. Now their game has grown so much too.

Her legacy will be more than just those crystal balls. That's a beautiful thing when you walk into women's -- her legacy goes far beyond that. Really in some ways a once in a lifetime coach, person, who truly made her mark.

**Q. Can you talk about game planning for a team that's dual faceted? They've got the dominant inside guy to Edey but shoot the ball at a high clip. How do you game plan for a team that can go inside but also shoot the ball as well?**

RICK BARNES: Again, that's what we were talking about with five guys that have got to be all connected. Edey, we could talk about him all day, but there's so many other guys on that team we could talk about too who understand their role, do their job. You really have to be in the relentless pursuit of sustaining your effort within a possession.

You turn your back, you turn your head, you stop for a split second, .5 seconds, they're moving around, searching out the three-point line, back cutting. They know how to play basketball. Again, so well coached. It takes five guys willing to make a sustained effort for possession after possession after possession, going from play to play to play.

**Q. Do you get a sense when you watch teams, especially one you're about to play, there's I guess two kinds of schools maybe. There's those that are on the joyride and those that are here on a business trip. Can you see which one of those two Purdue has looked like?**

RICK BARNES: I think they've been business-like, I do. From the time, even over in Maui, again, that tournament -- think about it, in three days we played Syracuse, Purdue, and Kansas. It's just a great tournament over there.

I've always thought that, when you have -- when you're talking about building programs, I think it's always a business approach to it, a work ethic approach to it, knowing that every time you go out you've got a chance to get better, be better, to try to build to these type moments.

**Q. You talked about playing Saturday, Sunday effectively. What sense can you make of, if you can make any, of you guys having the late game last night but you're here first 12 hours later. Then also, somebody has to play Sunday at 2:00, but why you? Please tee off on somebody for me.**

RICK BARNES: You think about all that sometimes, but regardless of what it is, you're probably, what, if I say we went to bed last night at -- our guys, I think Josiah told me he was in bed at 4:00, I would imagine the Purdue players watched our game and doing what guys do, probably in bed at 1:30, 2:00. So there's probably a two-hour window there one way or the other.

The difference is the other game, the second game is being played in Central time zone probably. But it is what it is. You deal with it. They're young guys. One of our big things will be recovery, and I'm sure Purdue the same thing because we know it's going to be a hard-fought game.

So a big part of today and even last night, and one of the reasons we were late getting out of here last night, we have three or four guys, they love to take ice baths. We had to wait on those guys. They jump in it about seven to 10 minutes. So it's all about recovery and doing what we need to do to be ready.

**Q. You mentioned adding Jordan and Dalton for their offense, and I talked to Dalton about the end of the season he was getting more shots up and becoming almost heliocentric on offense. How do you balance wanting those guys to get all their looks because they're such good offensive players, Dalton especially, and getting everybody involved because you want to play high ball pressure defense and all that, and that's hard to ask of someone when they're not getting touches or not getting shots. How do you balance that buy-in, and what do you tell Dalton whether to look for his shot and pass it to others?**

RICK BARNES: I told him last night when he took a couple of shots, I said, you're going to have to spray that ball. But when he makes a couple, he's like any guys that can score, he'll gonna do the old heat check and see if it's going.

But we believe in balance in the flow of the game, we're expecting those guys to play off the concepts that we talk about, work on from day one. On dead balls, yeah, we can make calls and get shots and do those type things, knowing full well that Purdue did a great job of having us scouted. There's not going to be a lot of easy shots, and you're going to have to take some tough shots and contest the shots and hope you can make them. We've got a couple guys that can do that.

Dalton and I have had that discussion when he needs to facilitate, and he's really adjusted well to it. He does. He's not a selfish player at all. But sometimes, too, you know that you've got to get a guy like that going. So last night early we started the game running a set for him to try to get

it going. Tomorrow night we might go a different way.

But what's gotten us to this point, we've got to just try to hope that it is enough, and we've got to execute it at a high level.

**Q. Both Jahmai and Josiah talked about how SEC play helped the development of Jonas and Tobe. Do you agree? And what is it about conference play that kind of helps develop a big?**

RICK BARNES: Well, our conference this year, again, I think, when you look at our league -- and I say it, everyone says their league is the best, this, that, and whatever. But our league, going into the last week of the season, there was a possibility of having a five-way tie for first place. Coming down the stretch, we had to play Texas A&M, Alabama, Auburn, South Carolina, all those back to back.

We know each other so well, and it's so hard to get clean looks. It's just hard because in a conference that's what makes it so difficult. Coaches know each other. We just know each other, and it's hard.

So that along with, again, our non-league schedule. We felt that we had put together a great schedule at the beginning of the year. Again, I thought it hurt us because we weren't able to develop our young players because we were in so many one, two-possession games that we weren't able to get those guys out there as much as we would have liked to.

But our league is -- when I first got there, it was a very athletic league, strong, physical league. It has changed now where it's not only that, we've gotten so much more skilled in our league. Great coaches. Again, I think there's always been terrific coaches in the SEC and college basketball in general. But it's just I really think more of a commitment from universities that maybe hadn't done it in the past where every time you go out on the court, you know you're going to be challenged. There's a great deal of physicality in our league.

**Q. Rick, was there any indication that you all had just from anything in practice or meetings or anything that Josiah would start shooting the ball like this again and get more aggressive and accurate going into this tournament?**

RICK BARNES: No, I think the one thing as coaches, we all wish we could coach making shots going in anyway. When you start doing that -- but when you work, Josiah is one of those guys, like Dalton, like Zakai, just hours and hours in the gym by himself. I thought his mindset was just terrific yesterday.

You've seen this. He's capable of doing it. Right now is when you'd like to see them all go in, but as long as he's taking good shots -- and I will say this. When it leaves his hand, when he's set up the way we want him to get set up, we think it is going in.

I just hope he can continue with the mindset he's got going right now because he was just terrific on defense last night.

**Q. There's so much been made, rightfully so, about Zach Edey and what the interior guys have to do to limit him as best they can, but what about the perimeter players, what you have to do to contain Purdue's guards, because they have some dangerous guys can drive and shoot as well?**

RICK BARNES: Again, team defense, you've got to have it. Again, I'm not sure those guys maybe get all the attention they should because I've watched a lot of attention go to Dalton, where we've got guys on our team that make so many winning plays, things that don't show up in a stat, like Jahmai Mashack, the stuff he does that doesn't show up on the scouting report is really amazing.

Even Zakai, some things that he does, Josiah, Santi, those guys. I look at Purdue players the same way. They've got guys out there that maybe aren't talked about as much as people might know, but when you watch them, getting ready to play against them, you have the utmost respect for them because of how hard they play and how hard they work at doing their job.

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