

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Kentucky vs Tennessee

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Zakai Zeigler

Cade Phillips

Jahmai Mashack

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

Q. Jahmai, how much are you motivated now by the thought that every time you go out there might be the last time that you play with these guys?

JAHMAI MASHACK: It's definitely surreal, putting in so much work and time. These are my guys and brothers. The four years went by fast. Knowing that Zakai was with me all four years, he understands the experience.

But like I've been saying this whole time I've been on the podium, every time I come up here, people have no idea the stuff we've gone through as a team. Like the ups and downs, the mental-health struggles, the having to go through injuries, transfer portal stuff. We've had to go through so much in order to get to this point, and for us to really fight through that and show that adversity, I think is probably one of the most special teams that I've been a part of. Knowing it's going to be the last one is surreal, but I'm excited to keep going and keep moving forward.

Q. With this tournament it's been a tough road against the Wildcats. What's going to have to change to get the win?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: We didn't play like ourselves the first two times we played. I could say, obviously they won they game, they got the best of us.

Just going out there, everybody doing our jobs, being ourselves, that's going to be the main goal. If we do that, I feel like we have a pretty good chance to win the game.

Q. Zakai, I understand you're the shortest scholarship



player in the last 45 years at Tennessee. Despite your size, what allows you to be such a good player?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Just being myself. My mom always told me height don't matter or anything like that. As long as I go out do there do what I need to do, you'll be out there on the court. Just really being a dog, playing as hard as I can at all times, just being myself.

My mom always told me it was possible. I always believed it. I'm going to prove it every time I'm out on the court.

Q. This is the first time Tennessee and Kentucky are meeting in the NCAA Tournament. What does it mean to be part of this rivalry and to still be making history as part of this established rivalry?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I feel like it's one of the biggest rivalries in college basketball. It's definitely fun going into Rupp, going into TBA playing those games. There's a lot of emotion that goes into it.

This being the first time meeting in a place like this, especially for a moment like this, especially knowing how many seniors we've got on this team and going into the game, how the season went and the regular season playing against them, so it definitely is going to be a lot of fun going out there. And it's definitely going to mean a lot to us but to all Vol Nation.

CADE PHILLIPS: I'll back that up. I think it's one of the biggest rivalries in not just college basketball but college sports throughout the sports. Every time we play each other, it's one of the biggest stages in the country. For it to be even elevated even more to be in March Madness, just adds that much more to the rivalry.

JAHMAI MASHACK: Same thing. I'm big on rivalries. When I don't like a school, I don't like it. And I want to do everything I can to make sure that we win that game. I'm taking this as serious as I possibly can. And everybody knows, this whole team knows, we want nothing more but to not just win but make a statement with a team like this.

Like I said, we didn't play ourselves the first two times. We know we have to do it into this game we've got to play Tennessee basketball at the best level.



Q. You guys have been around campus a while. What do you remember most from the baseball team winning it all last summer and everything that kind of went with that? And how badly do you guys want to give that to Coach Barnes and your program?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I remember, I was in my apartment watching the game. I remember when he got that strikeout and everybody in the whole city, they started beeping their horns, people were outside. People started running around.

It was amazing to be in Knoxville when that happened and just witness how great the feeling was because it didn't feel like that only the baseball team won; it felt like the whole city won.

Definitely winning a national championship in basketball, knowing what this team has been through, knowing what Coach Barnes has been through, it would definitely mean a lot not only to us, but to him.

And the ups and downs and how much we go through in practice, how much work we put in, how much we sacrifice individually, it would definitely mean a lot to us. It would definitely mean a lot to Coach Barnes.

JAHMAI MASHACK: I've said it a lot. Winning a natty for me would be cool. I feel it would be great. But nobody deserves a national championship than the city of Knoxville and Coach Barnes. If you look and sit down and pay attention to the fan base they're nothing short of amazing.

Their commitment to this program, their commitment to the players, no matter if we win, lose, whatever, the people that are real true Vol fans they deserve nothing more but a national championship.

And that's what I'm fighting for. That's what I'm fighting to try to get. Like I said, it's not for me. It's not even for my teammates. It's for the fans and the city of Knoxville that's been waiting for so long for something like this because they've come so close and have always almost gotten there and have had some great teams.

I want to be the player and the team to come out and get that for them because they deserve nothing short of a national championship.

Q. Cade, you guys were so good defensively all year, especially defending the 3-point line. Kentucky hit 12 in each game. Was there a common denominator for the breakdowns? Why did they have so much success?

CADE PHILLIPS: Both Z and Jahmai said it -- we didn't play Tennessee basketball when we played them. We understand that. The good thing about our team is we had as much early season success as anybody, but I think we've also improved throughout the season just as much as anybody. So these are two totally different teams that are playing this go-around compared to the first two.

Q. I saw you guys were at the Pacers-Lakers game last night. What was the experience like? What was it like to see your former teammate play?

JAHMAI MASHACK: It was exciting. It was definitely a great moment just to go out and see him play. We don't get a lot of opportunities to see him just in general because he's busy with his schedule, busy with ours.

Being able to interact with him, talk to him, outside of just the phone, it was really cool to see and it was a great game as well. Glad we were able to go out and do something different as a team.

CADE PHILLIPS: I think it's cool to see an NBA game because that's where we all want to be in the next couple years. So to see a guy we've known, we've seen him put the work in, a guy we love, to see him doing what he loves to do and what we want to do really is more of an inspiration than anything to work harder and really get that much closer to our goals.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: It was really a great experience. Like Cade said, one day we all want to be in that position that he's in today. We saw all the work he's put in every single day to get to where he's at.

Just knowing some of the things we know now and through the game of basketball and just the little things I feel it was a little bit different for me personally just being able to watch it up close. But it definitely was an eye-opening experience, and I'm really glad to see him out there.

Q. Jahmai, what's it like having Zakai as a teammate? When did you realize that he was the right person to lead this team?

JAHMAI MASHACK: All jokes aside, this is one of my closest friends, is a brother, somebody I'm going to have for the rest of my life.

Honestly, something that's been on my mind, but I feel like he deserves more respect just as a point guard. I feel like he's the best point guard in the country. I don't feel like it's close. For him to be able to do what he does on both ends, leading in assists on the team, being able to score

the ball, how he handles the game, how he controls the game throughout the whole game, throughout 40 minutes, the amount of minutes he plays.

Like, all that being in consideration and then also being a part of the Naismith Defensive Player of the Year with me, you don't see point guards doing that. I feel as an overall game, the overall point guard, I feel he's the best point guard in the country. I don't think it's close, for him to be able to do it on both sides of the ball.

But if you just look at his career, you look at even the season, he goes through stints where if he's not shooting well, he'll figure out a way to make his team better. If he goes through stints where he's turning the ball over, he'll still figure out a way to make his team better.

I think the versatility, the resilience for what he's gone through, obviously, like I said before, he's my brother. So I have fights with him all the time. We've gotten into each other.

But we're always connected, we're always close. And I think it makes our competitive spirit as good as it is today.

But, man, having him as a point guard for four years, I'm blessed to be able to have somebody like him have my back.

Q. Both of you guys said when you played Kentucky you didn't play Tennessee basketball. Can you define that for us? It's been over a month since the last game. In what way has Tennessee changed since then?

CADE PHILLIPS: Defensively, we're a team that prides ourselves on defensive and toughness. And that's something that we practice every day. And we felt that the first two times we played Kentucky that was not an emphasis of what we did. We felt like our head was other places.

So it has been longer than a little over a month since we played them. We've played a lot of big games since then.

So our team, we've learned a lot about each other and about ourselves. And, like I said earlier, we've continued to improve. We're a very intrinsically focused team. We focus on every game what we need to do. That's where we've grown over the last month.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Really on the defensive end, we weren't ourselves, little things like being in our gaps or 50/50 balls. So really just picking our intensity back up and just being ourselves.

We know we're the best defense in the country. We didn't show that either times that we played them. Offense is going to take care of itself. Coach Barnes lets us know that all the time.

But just being ourselves on defense, going out there, showing that we're the number one defense in the country and doing all the little things and everything, all the details that we are telling each other to do and sticking to the game plan, then we'll be fine. But I don't feel we did that in either game. We'll make sure to do better this time.

Q. There's at least one SEC team that's going to make it to the Elite Eight. Possibly six could make it. Just what do you think that says about the conference as a whole and just the amount of competition you faced so far?

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think it just shows how deep this conference was, how tough this conference was. Like, we really beat each other up this whole time. You could see some teams were tired going into the tournament. Some teams were able to kick that second gear. Luckily we were able to hit that second gear. We want to hit another one.

But, man, like, every game you play in this feels like it was a Quad 1 game. Every home crowd you have, you feel like you're coming in and they're going to go at you. They're going to have that energy.

I think throughout the whole season, having to go through all those teams, it helps you build resilience. It helps you with the experience. I think we've grown throughout the time, like, we've definitely done what we need to do as far as getting the wins we were supposed to.

We dropped some losses we felt like we could have grown from. But every loss we had this season, I feel like we've gotten better from it.

I think the experience of going through different teams, playing different play styles, different offenses and defenses, it gets us ready for a tournament like this where you don't know who you're going to play.

I think, obviously, to answer your question, the SEC, this is the best conference, I think, that's ever been. It's amazing to be able to be part of such a great conference.

Q. Zakai, being a smaller player, were you a fan of Kentucky's Tyler Ulis once upon a time when he was there?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I was a fan of Tyler Ulis, not Kentucky,

but I was a fan Tyler Ulis for sure. He was somebody that won defensive player of the year and player of the year, the same year. He's about my size. He's a great player, great point guard. Definitely somebody I looked up to.

Q. Zakai, you've been around for a while. You know the back and forth that goes on between the two fan bases, Kentucky and Tennessee. How much extra pressure is there on you and your teammates to make sure you don't lose to those guys three times in a row?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Well, I wouldn't really say it's extra pressure because, you know, we're going out there doing what we do every single day. You can't really control if the ball goes in the basket or not, but you can control things like our defense and our effort.

So going out there and just doing what we do and just knowing that Vol Nation will have our back no matter what. We know they're going to have our back and give us energy and whether they're there in the stadium or whether they're in the TV, we feel that energy no matter what.

Vol Nation, we have the best fan base in the country. Whether they're there or not they're going to bring the energy and they're going to bring the fight to us. And whatever stadium we play in we know they're going to feed the floor.

I don't feel any pressure. I know my teammates don't really feel any pressure. We'll just go out there and do what we do.

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