

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

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Lucas Oil Stadium

## Tennessee Volunteers Coach Rick Barnes

### Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

RICK BARNES: Obviously excited and blessed to have this opportunity to be here and represent the University of Tennessee in this next round. I'm so happy for our players and everyone involved with our program.

Obviously we've played Kentucky twice and they've played great against us. I think both games, made 12 3s in each game. And Mark has done a great job. I've often said to people, it's maybe one of the most if not the most difficult job in the country when you talk about basketball. I just think he's done a great job coming in following a guy like John Calipari who did a lot, so much there.

Just really impressed with what he's done with the entire program and the way he was able to get there and put a team together that has them playing this time of year as well.

**Q. Jahmai said that Zakai is the best point guard in the country. What makes him the best point guard in the country? Just how big of an asset is it to have Zakai on your side?**

RICK BARNES: Well, I think it's easy for all of us to look at him and say that because of how he impacts the game in ways, from the way he picks up 94 feet, how often he gets screened with ball screens and the effort that he plays with on both offense and defense and the fact that he was not a player that was highly sought after coming out of high school.

But he's never flinched in terms of competition. From the time he stepped foot on our campus, he's never made anything about him. He's a very unselfish person. He cares about people. Certainly a high-level competitor. But the way he impacts the game in so many different ways and how much he's improved.



I say it all the time, what people see him do during the game, we watch it every day in practice. And that's who he is. He doesn't take time off. I worry about him all the time with how hard he goes.

I watch him go through a practice like it's the last one he's going to have. Then he'll spin it and spend 30 minutes in the gym working on something. That's why he is and who he is and why, like Jahmai, I wouldn't -- we wouldn't trade him for anybody in the country.

**Q. Cade and Zakai both said, regarding the two Kentucky games, we just didn't play Tennessee basketball. How would you define that? It's been over a month since you guys played. What's different about your team now?**

RICK BARNES: I think when you don't play Tennessee basketball, I think you've got to give them credit, for whatever reason. I think when you lose a game, it's easy to start saying we didn't do this or we didn't do that. But the fact is they did what they did and they probably had something to do with why we didn't do this or that.

They shot the ball well. I can tell you that, do I think -- again, when they're open, do I think their shots are going to go in? Absolutely. But you also you have to think that might be part of their schemes that we weren't ready for.

You have to give them all the credit.

But we've got to be better, we know that. But both of those games were very close-played games. And they made more plays and the right plays when they needed to. And we'll have to be better.

You're right. It seems like it's been forever that we last saw them.

But I go back, nothing but the utmost respect -- the first time we played them I think it was maybe the first game Lamont didn't play, I think. And that game took on a personality early, a lot like what happened when we played Florida, when they came back to our place after getting beat by 30 down there and we had two starters that didn't play and we won that game.



Sometimes it doesn't make rhyme nor reason how it works out, other than the fact that we're both here again, which I think is a compliment to our league and to both programs. And we have a chance to do it again.

**Q. You referenced those 12 3s in both games. You were one of the best in the country at defending the 3-point line. Was there a common denominator?**

RICK BARNES: Attribute some of that to the actions they run. And we didn't defend it. And they made tough ones too. And they had the ability to do that.

You can guard them, but when you let a team get confident, get rhythm, it's even harder to break it. But I think that you've got to give them credit for their schemes and whether it was we didn't do a good enough job getting back in transition, finding people, not on edge enough with the zoom actions they run or ball screen, you can name it. They got it done and we didn't.

**Q. The rivalry is as intense as it gets. But when you add on the stage what's at stake, is there a challenge for both coaches that your guys aren't too hyped and exhausted after the first 90 seconds?**

RICK BARNES: Well, yeah. People are going to be excited. Both teams are going to be excited. And obviously I would assume this is the first time that both teams have ever met in a regional, a first-round game of a regional.

I just know that both teams -- I expect them to be at their very best and I think they would expect the same from us. And how each guy handles that after this many games, I wouldn't think it would be something they're going to be too overly amped about. I think you've got to be on edge obviously, but our goal is that we can improve -- we've got one more practice before we play them -- that we can improve today and be ready to go tomorrow.

**Q. You were in Omaha when the baseball team won last year. What do you most remember from that, not necessarily what it meant for that team but what it meant for the campus and town. Have you allowed yourself to think what it could do for your program?**

RICK BARNES: I don't do that. I'm a one-day-at-a-time kind of guy. One, was I extremely excited for the University of Tennessee? Absolutely because I was there 10 years ago when a lot was in flux and things weren't going maybe the way everybody wanted it to.

Now I go back now with our leadership from Randy Boyd,

Donde Plowman and what Danny White and his staff have done is remarkable. And it really is.

I remember my first year, 10 years ago, we weren't in the NCAA Tournament, I'm talking about before we ever coached a became. I walked out to the baseball stadium one night and sat there. I promise you, I could have counted the people that were there. And to see what Tony has done.

I think it was a major thing because, one, I respect every coach on campus. And we're all chasing that. We're all chasing that championship. But I do think what's happened on our campus in the last couple of years is really amazing. I'm just proud and blessed that God's given me a chance to be a part of it.

**Q. I know you hate distractions, so I apologize if you've already addressed this. But I did want to give you an opportunity to address all these wild rumors out there that you may be stepping down after the end of this season.**

RICK BARNES: No, I haven't thought about it. You know what? My last press conference at Texas, when I was fired, the last question someone asked me was, do you think you'll coach again.

And I had already accepted the University of Tennessee job. I made the comment, yeah, probably sooner than you think. And I literally walked out of that press conference, got on a plane and went to Knoxville.

At the time, when something like that happens, the movement parts, in/out, you're somewhat numb. But I made the comment that, the athletic director at the time, Steve Patterson, fired me. He didn't really fire me; he just carried out what God wanted him to do because I truly believe that God brought me to Knoxville for a reason.

And everything that I do I want to live on that platform. It's the most important thing to me. It's more important than winning that game tomorrow. And I think God will make it perfectly clear when he wants me to step down and my time will be up. But it's not now.

If it is, I don't feel that. But I love coaching basketball. I love being around it. I know right now how hard we're working right now. We've already had a young man on campus after we got back Saturday, Sunday, we had a young man on campus that committed to us. We're already planning to have a team next year. I fully plan to be a part of it.

And, again, I think when my time's up, I truly believe God

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

will make it clear to me where he wants me to go next and do next. But I haven't thought about that in the least bit.

I think when that happened when that rumor started, I made a comment about Zakai, I said it would be hard coaching without a guy like that. I meant that, but I could have said that about my first point guard at George Mason 30 some years ago Amp Davis. I loved coaching him.

And I think after that, people thought because I'm a young guy now, that it might be my last year. But the fact is, I've put it all in God's hands. I'll know because he'll make it clear to me.

**Q. You were asked about sort of the athletic department in general a minute ago. Can there be a tangible benefit how much success so many teams at Tennessee are having? I'm just thinking about dining halls around campus. These athletes are just being around other athletes that have either won titles or are competing for them or won league titles. Does that stuff elevate an entire program in a way or department?**

RICK BARNES: I think it helps when you're around successful programs. I don't think there's any question. But I think it starts at the very top. I think our university, I think it started when Bill Haslam was governor, when he adjusted the board.

I think maybe one of the greatest hires for the university is Randy Boyd, who is doing it out of pure love. No other reason than he's a great visionary guy. What's happened on our campus is utterly remarkable. It's almost like why now. But he's got incredible vision.

Hiring Donde Plowman, I've never been around a chancellor like her. I think I'm right by saying this, I think it's the right time in the history of Tennessee that the president and chancellor hired the AD. They went out on a search. I'm sure they got some help from some people.

But they made the hire in bringing in Danny White and what he and his staff have done. He's made it clear, not in a threatening type way, but in a way that, as a former athlete himself, he said, hey, I want us to be great in everything. And we're going to provide what you need for each sport.

And I look at, Chris Woodruff, our tennis coach, came by yesterday. We became close. And watch what he's done and what our women's tennis team is doing.

You go back, and Josh Heupel has done a phenomenal but. We can talk all day about Tony. And Karen Weekly,

the softball coach, they've been maybe the consistent program in 30 years. Maybe. You know that better than me.

But I do think that the athletes have a great deal of respect for each other. I know obviously the coaches have that for each other because we know how hard it is to win in our sport, and we know that their sports mean just as much to them, whether you're talking swimming, diving, whatever it may be, track and field.

There's a standard that when you see other teams living up to it, it's just naturally that you want to live up to it and do everything you can because I know this: I think we're all blessed. Even after some games when you lose, I really always have a prayer to myself and thinking that, hey, there's a lot of guys that would like to be sitting in this losing locker room.

I think we've got an incredible opportunity like everybody else. But it's a blessing that God's given us to be able to be at Tennessee at this time because it's a lot to be proud of.

Everybody talks about their fan bases, everybody. And I don't think there's a program in the country that has sold out men's basketball, football, baseball, women's softball and I know we've done that. And I think that speaks volumes to how our fan base feels about us. And we hope we can keep take it further and further.

**Q. You get to spend every day with one of the very best point guards in the country in Zakai. But what are your thoughts on Lamont Butler and trying to play through the injury the way he is?**

RICK BARNES: A lot of respect and admiration. I know I felt really bad in our game. He got hit right there about 15 feet away from me. I knew the way he went down, it was tough.

I've had two shoulder surgeries myself. I know how that feels. I'm not sure the extent of what he has, but when you get shoulder pain, it's hard to sleep at night; you can never get comfortable in a bed.

I can tell you that -- I don't know how he's done it because going out there knowing he's a point guard, going get screened a lot, whether it's on-ball screens or off-ball screens and keep fighting.

I noticed watching film the other day, he was trying to protect it at one time. I see it. You have to have great admiration for a guy that is willing to go out and play in that type of pain.

**Q. What happened to this league to get it to this point with 14 teams in?**

RICK BARNES: 10 years ago, when I walked in my first meeting, it was, I think, Commissioner Sankey's first. And I think he would tell you that Mike Slive already started the wheels rolling a little bit. But he came in and made the comment that he had envisioned one day that we could be like our softball programs. I think that year they had 10, 12 teams, they had them all in the tournament.

But he said that -- he talked about the league. He was very transparent about where the league was and where his leadership and having to do his part with the athletic directors because I don't think there was a real commitment by all the universities in the league.

My thought was -- I had been fortunate to be at Clemson, Texas, Ohio State, Alabama as an assistant coach, head coach at Clemson. I can't imagine not using football to help you recruit. Those football weekends are incredible. We all know that football is the train that drives it all. We know that.

But, you know, there wasn't a commitment back then, 10 years ago, by every university. There wasn't. And evidently he got that message across on campus because now, our league, you can tell a difference when you go into the arenas, the locker rooms, everything is different. But he also talked about scheduling.

Back when I was at George Mason, you tried to schedule SEC teams in November and December because you felt like you could go in and play in front of nobody and maybe be able to steal a game knowing that they may not respect you for it.

But our scheduling at the time wasn't very good overall. So that was something he addressed. We put some things in place. The league put some things in place here to take care of that.

I will tell you this, I've never coached against a bad coach. But sometimes we're not on the same level playing field. Sometimes some have more than others. Over time it shows, maybe not over one or two games, but over the course of the season it does.

But I'm impressed with where we are. We could talk a lot about officiating. At one time the SEC years ago was the gold standard. When John Guthrie stepped away from it, for whatever reason, the league lost its luster there.

Again, he brought Mike Tranghese in as a consultant and

Dan Leibovitz as a basketball coach, did an incredible job. Both of them, I know Mike -- Mike sat on the committee forever, Big East committee. He knows basketball as well as anybody in the country. And Dan obviously being a coach, knew it from a coaching side what was going on.

So it started right there and then Mark Whitehead came in, got it started with the officiating program, because at the time when I was there Dale Kelley, a wonderful man, God rest his soul, was more of an assigner. We needed to have a program in place developing officials.

Mark started it and Mike Tranghese comes in and followed up where you wouldn't believe where I think we've got the best officials in the country. I look at our young guys right now, there's no doubt in my mind they're going to be Final Four guys.

But I've watched it over 10 years, obviously the coaches. But the biggest thing has been the commitment from the top, from the universities saying, hey, we can be good in basketball as well as football and baseball, whatever it may be, because at the time you think about the SEC, they were good in everything.

They struggled behind in basketball. I think that year maybe three teams in the tournament. It was bad. We didn't get it. But the only sport that really wasn't living up to the "It just means more" was the basketball side of it. And it wasn't coaches. It wasn't just the coaches, because again we've had great coaches in that league. So the league and the universities have done their part to get it to this point, too.

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