

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

Friday, March 28, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Rick Barnes

Zakai Zeigler

Jordan Gainey

Felix Okpara

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Tennessee 78, Kentucky 65

RICK BARNES: Just again, the utmost respect for University of Kentucky and Mark Pope, just great respect all around for that university and him as a person. Extremely proud of our guys. They beat us twice and scored. I think they hit 12 threes in both games, and obviously, tonight, our number one objective, even though, to be quite honest with you, was the last two games too, but they just -- they beat us. We guarded the three-point line, and just blessed having these guys every day, how hard they work and I'm just... thank God the fact that I get to spend another day with them.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, please raise your hand. Name your affiliation, and please direct your question. Right here in front.

Q. For both Zakai and Rick. They seemed to operate the first two games with probably more ease offensively than most of your opponents are used to operating. Did you want to come out tonight and maybe set a tone kind of physically that the games were going to be played on different terms?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: (Inaudible) we really wanted to set the tone and show them who we were. The first two times we played them at their place and our place. We knew regardless of what happened, we were going to go out and play Tennessee basketball on the offensive and defensive end, and I feel like we did that great tonight.



RICK BARNES: I don't ever want to take anything away. They beat us. Whether we did or didn't do our job, the fact is they beat us, but we knew we had to defend the three-point line better. They made three tonight. They got 13 off and Lamont Butler was terrific. He made four of them. That was our number one goal. They run such good offense. We just wanted to take away the easy back cuts and the three-point line, and we did a better job today than the other two games.

Q. Zakai, the last two times you say wasn't Tennessee basketball. Tonight, 18 points, 10 assists, what do you say about anyone who doubted Tennessee basketball tonight?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: You know they got a lot of threes off. They got what they wanted to get off. The second time, they got anything they really wanted on us. Going into this, we had to really emphasize all the little things we usually do, whether that's being in our gaps, running guys off, not getting back cut. So it really came down to little things like that. Everyone just staying laser focused and playing Tennessee basketball for 20 minutes in the first half, and 20 minutes in the second half. Putting two halves together was really important for us, and we did an amazing job of that tonight.

Q. Felix, for you, that one sequence in the second half, you get the dunk, stealing the backboard, the guy hits the three. That feels like a one-shining moment. What was your emotions right there when that happened?

FELIX OKPARA: It felt great. It felt like we were playing Tennessee basketball, playing aggressive, playing smart around. We trust Zakai making our shot. For me, just playing my heart out, playing aggressive and trying to play defensive.

Q. Zakai, Chaz has his moments tonight. For y'all to control that game as much as you did without Chaz going off, what does that say about the rest of y'all?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I feel like we're a great all-around team. Chaz is a great player and one of the most unselfish guys. He's going to make the same cuts and do what he has to do, Whether he gets the shot or makes the ball or do

whatever. He might make a cut to get somebody else open and he understands that. The way he plays, it might not look like he's doing much, but he's doing all the little things to get open. Everybody down the line on our team are amazing basketball players, and we're a great all-around team.

Q. Jordan, for you, as a competitor, as hard as you guys work, how rewarding is it to maybe -- I don't know if it was the best game of the season, but it was close on this stage against that opponent, how rewarding is that?

JORDAN GAINEY: It's very rewarding. We came into this one knowing what was at stake. We had a chip on our shoulder since we stepped in the film room and we proofed it. We played good team basketball and had fun out there.

Q. Zakai, this is for you. It seems like, I don't know if handing the keys over to you is the right way to put it, but Rick Barnes trusted you with the offense, and from the start of the game to the end of the game, you were dictating how Kentucky was trying to guard you guys. What does it mean for Coach to give you the reigns and let you run what you need to run.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: It's amazing having a Coach like this, hall of fame coach giving me the keys and having that much trust in me means the world to me. Back to when I was being recruited by him, and him telling me he's going to give me a fair shot of being on the court, ever since that conversation, Coach Barnes has never lied to me about anything.

Up to this point, coming in, I was never really a point guard, and for me to be one of the top point guards in the country now and him bringing me into that is amazing. And for him to have that much trust in me, it's amazing. My mom calls me about it all the time and says she's so thankful about it, and I can't even put into words how thankful I am for Coach to have that much trust in me and belief in me that much.

Q. Zakai, your bench had 23 points tonight to Kentucky's 6. How important is it for them to make that impact in each game?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Like I was saying earlier, we have a great all-around team whether it's the starter five or coming off the bench, we can -- in practice, we go at it every single day. I don't feel like... guys start during the game, but it's really next man up. No matter who is out there, we feel comfortable with everybody out there, whether -- everybody, whether you're starting, playing one minute or two minutes or 30 minutes, everybody is out there, and they know what they're doing. We feel comfortable with it.

It was an amazing job, and it was a great all-around effort.

Q. Question for Felix and Zakai. This might be difficult with Jordan sitting between the two of you, but at what point are people outside the state of Tennessee and the Southeastern Conference going to have to mention Jordan Gainey?

FELIX OKPARA: I feel like he's is a real good basketball player, and I feel like he gets slept on a lot. He's putting in the work, and you can see it pays off. For him coming off the bench, it's important for us coming off the bench because he can bring that fire when we need it. With him on the team, it makes our team a little more -- you know taking out -- every time we try to take out Chaz, we have JG on the line making plays.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, he's the best sixth man in the country. JG is a sixth starter. Every time he steps on the court, he's like a microwave, he's hot all right. Me and him, we go out and practice. Throughout the summer, we talked so much trash to each other. We go at it all the time, whether it's one-on-one, five-on-five. I see the work he puts in. I'll be beating him in a lot of shooting contests, but I know how great of a shooter he is. I'm just really happy to be on a team with Jordan Gainey.

Q. For Felix, you had 17 of your team's offensive rebounds tonight. How do you think those points contributed to your guys' success tonight?

FELIX OKPARA: It was key. You know, Coach jut told me I got to be a dog in the glass. I just took that personally. The first two games, I didn't give my full effort. I just put in my mind to get the rebounds and get everything else. I think I did a pretty good job of that.

Q. Jordan, being the sixth man and playing those important minutes, those intense minutes, how has that -- how have you embraced that role and how have your teammates helped you embrace that role?

JORDAN GAINEY: My teammates help me every day in practice, making sure I do what I'm supposed to do. When it comes to game time, there's nothing new out there. Everything seems natural, and we're all playing team basketball. I'm just doing whatever it takes for us to win the game, so.

Q. For Jordan and for Zakai, now that y'all don't have to play Kentucky anymore, can you talk about what the plan was going in against those guys? Was it different defensively, the plan, or did you execute what you wanted to do better from the first couple of games?

JORDAN GAINEY: The game plan was the same. We executed very well today, and we played team basketball, connected on the defensive end, dominated the glass from Felix to Igor, everyone played their part today, and we just all had fun going out there and doing it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Thank you, guys.

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ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, the game plan. The first two times, we didn't execute what we had to do. Kentucky is a great basketball team, a well-coached team, a great-shooting team. I feel like tonight, we were more than locked into the game plan and we had that scouting report and knew what we wanted to do and went out there and did it.

Q. Rick, a lot of your peers have given up this profession because of the changing landscape. So when you get to a moment like this and you have stuck through it, what goes through your mind?

RICK BARNES: If you want me to be totally transparent, I have been praying and thanking God for the opportunity to be here because I think all things come from Him and it's a blessing. We talk about being here at this time, and the number one objective is to bring glory to Him, and that's what I was thinking about, how blessed I am to have the opportunity to stay in this business, and hopefully, by what we do, we bring the glory to Him.

THE MODERATOR: Time for one more. Anyone?

Q. For Rick, sort of the same question that I asked a couple of the guys earlier. I know y'all, as a program, aren't the biggest on getting accolades and individual attention, but do you think enough people talk about Jordan Gainey and what he's been doing?

RICK BARNES: No, I don't. I think one of the biggest compliments that Jordan should get, when we're on the road or someplace like this, and they introduce the players, we never come out because we don't consider that we've got just five starters. We consider him a starter, and that's a tradition we've had all year. Our motto has been "it's not about me". So, again, we don't go out. They stay together, work together, sweat together. Jordan, you know, he's a starter. He's as much a starter as anybody, and we've had teams deeper than that, but I'm glad he's with us. I really appreciate a number of years ago when Lamonte Turner and Jordan Bowden said if he decides to transfer, he's one of us. And what he's been able to do in two years is really a compliment to who he is.

His dad is on the staff, and if you have been around his family, you know what he's about and it's never been about him. All he's wanted to do was play his role and he's done it as well as anyone can do it.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®