

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

**Tennessee Volunteers**  
**Coach Rick Barnes**  
**Jahmai Mashack**

**Felix Okpara**  
**Igor Milicic, Jr.**

**Chaz Lanier**  
**Zakai Zeigler**

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference



what that rivalry is about. But we've never let any of that get in the way of our friendship. What makes him -- if you knew his pedigree and who he is, he hasn't changed a bit. He's the same guy. Highly competitive. Beautiful family. Yesterday it warmed my heart to see him holding his grandson.

But he's intense. I think he would tell you at one time when he went to the NBA, I'm not sure if he thought he would ever come back to college. It's been great to have him back in the game. He would tell you he's been extremely blessed. God's shown great favor over him and his family. But I love him. I love Kelvin Sampson, and he and I will be friends until the day we die. We'll probably spend a lot of time together when we're both done with it because of the fact that he's a fun guy to be around.

**Q. Rick, Kelvin talked a lot about pushing players and making it hard to play for his program, but he also hasn't had a lot of transfers. I'm wondering... is it more difficult to do that as a coach these days given the transfer portal, everything that's going into it in terms of pushing players to get the most out of them?**

RICK BARNES: I don't think so. I think if you're honest up front with players and tell them exactly how you're going to be and you're transparent with them, you get the right guy. It's hard when coaches lie to players, that it's going to be like a rose garden and it's not going to work out. I think if you tell them the way it's going to be, we're blessed that we have a group of guys who have set extremely high standards for themselves. And I have always said in recruiting, there's enough players out there for all of us. You have to get the ones that fit your personality and the way you want to play. I've got a group of guys that we feel like that about. We've always tried to do that. There's no doubt that Kelvin -- he knows what works for him. We all do. Maybe when you're younger, you might say, well, maybe we can change a guy or two, but the only way guys are going to change if you want them to play the way you want to play is if you've got a group of guys that bring it every day. The players have to change the players. Coaches can be hard on guys and demand and... but you have to have a program around you. It goes back to the recruit, selection process. You better know up front, tell the truth and if they don't want it, move on to someone else.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll ask you to make opening remarks.

RICK BARNES: Again, we're blessed to have this opportunity to continue to play in the tournament and just an incredible amount of respect for Kelvin Sampson and his team. I've known Kelvin a lifetime. He and I have kind of grown up together, kind of grown old together, too. We know it's going to be an extremely difficult challenge. We respect their ability and how hard they play and how well they're coached. So we know what we're walking into.

**Q. Hey, Rick. What makes Kelvin so likable off the court? Fans get to see one side of him when he's on the court competing. What makes him such a good basketball coach?**

RICK BARNES: Well, we have known each other a lifetime. We met back in the '70s. He played at Pembroke State University and I played at Lenoir-Rhyne. Back then, they had these jamborees where we would get together. We had no rules. We could start practice the first day of school and practice all the time. We'd get together on weekends and maybe bring four teams together, play Friday night, Saturday, maybe into Sunday.

Just as I have gotten to know Kelvin, and through the years, we competed, Texas-Oklahoma, everybody knows



**Q. Jahmai for you, how beneficial do you think it is that a year ago on Saturday afternoon you were in a different city but doing the exact same thing? How much value do you think last year's experience is providing you this week?**

JAHMAI MASHACK: It's exciting to be here. I don't think heading into this year me and Z didn't expect anything less than to be back here. We made a promise to ourselves to get back here, but we want to be able to finish the job we didn't do last year. I feel like last year was a special group of guys. We probably won't have guys like that in Tennessee again, but I also feel like this group is a special group of guys, as well. I don't think there will ever be another Zakai that walks through the Tennessee doors. There will never be a Jahmai Mashack. Never be another Felix, Igor, Chaz, but that's what makes us special.

That being said, it's exciting to be back here, but we want to finish the job.

**Q. Rick, there's been pretty big-name coaches in football and basketball get out of this because of the current climate that you've adapted to. Did you ever have to sit down and have a pep talk with yourself and think about wanting to go on through everything we're talking about with the portal?**

RICK BARNES: No, I never did because I got a group of guys that I thoroughly enjoy being around every day. I love coaching these guys and there are days they probably don't like me very well, but some days I don't like them either (laughter). I know what they want and I think they know as a university what we want and we're never going to go over the top. We're going to coach hard as a staff, but we got a group of guys that they set some pretty high and lofty goals for themselves individually, and I think they would probably be disappointed in us as a staff if we didn't come out and give them our best every day and be consistent, but we all go through those grinds. When we're off the court, time's up, we're going to hang out and some days they might want to hang out with me. Some days they don't (laughter).

**Q. Coach, it's been well-documented that you guys have never made a Final Four. You were in the same position last year. What's the message this year with this little bit newer group heading into the biggest game of the season so far?**

RICK BARNES: Well, you just sent a message right there. University of Tennessee hasn't made one and it would be a great honor for us to do that. Something that, again, I think most teams start every year with a goal of getting to this

tournament and know that you get here. We have seen some of the craziest things happen throughout the history of it, but you all come into it, knowing that you would like to be the last team standing on Monday night. But the fact that -- I'm proud of these guys because I know how hard they've worked. Do we want it all? Yeah, we do. But we're no different that any other teams left right now. We all put a lot of work in to get there, but every team, we're going after the same thing. As much as we want it, other teams want it. We realize that and we hope we can be at our best.

**Q. For Zakai and Jahmai. Jahmai just mentioned the promise you guys made after last season. How quickly did that happen after that loss in Detroit? Was it immediate? Was it a couple of days? And for both of you, why was it so important to come back to Tennessee and finish the job you started?**

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I would say immediately. We pride ourselves on winning and I can remember times me and Jahmai being on the same team at practice and us losing in practice and ready to fight each other just off of losing the game of practice. Losing a game like that is something we take so much pride in knowing we had a chance to win a game and we didn't win it. It hurt us. Feeling our pain, we said, yo, we put all the work in, we came in together. We're going to leave out together. We pride ourselves on winning, so. Being back in this position we're in today is a blessing, but like you said, we got to finish the job still.

JAHMAI MASHACK: Yeah, like he said, it was immediately. Literally right after that game, of course going into the offseason, you don't have a feel for who's staying, who's leaving, who's going to be on your team next year, but we know if we kept our core and we kind of kept who wanted to be back here for next year, we knew we were going to have a chance. Like Zakai said, we're super competitive. It's in our blood. There are things I value in my life. One of those things is loyalty. Another is competitiveness, and it's the same thing that Tennessee holds for me. I wasn't going to leave them out to dry just because I lost. I feel like the Tennessee fans deserved something more. I don't care about getting national attention for me. I care about getting national attention for the Tennessee fan base, for Coach Barnes and for my teammates. I want to win for them because they put in so much work and time.

There have been times that Coach Barnes and I don't get along very well. We have a very special relationship. It may seem like we're not on the same page a lot of times, but he's a winner and I'm a winner and we both want it so bad that sometimes we go at each other. Same thing with me and Zakai. We're arguing with each other, yelling at



each other, but it's all because we want to win. It's that competitiveness is why we're here, and if we keep on proving it, we keep on doing it every day in practice, we'll be able to go far.

**Q. For Coach, Zakai, Igor, if you guys don't mind, when you throw in that tape, obviously the Houston defense jumps out. What is it about that defense and that program that separates themselves from other really good defenses, as well?**

RICK BARNES: Sound, very aggressive. As good a ball screen defensive team you can play in the country. They attack it really hard. They got great length and they really are so well-taught, schooled in that and they rebound it. You can't be a great defensive team if you can't finish it, and they do a great job of not only getting into the offensive boards, but they rebound the ball. Their coverage, they do a lot. They turn people over in their ball screens, the way they draft the post, just being very aggressive, and the more they can get you to the sideline, really even turn the heat up more, rotate over and build the wall over that way.

But it's Kelvin. His teams have always -- again, I don't know how many years now we've been playing against each other... that's who he is. He's who he's always been and he's underrated offensively. I think he's always done a great job getting his best players where they need to be, but defense, when you think of him and his program and rebounding are two of the things that come to mind.

IGOR MILICIC JR.: Yeah, like Coach said, they're really good at turning people over from ball screens and that comes from them being handsy and having their hands high all the time. Also, the rotation. They go through rotations really quickly and they fix up matchups. So we have to be ready for that. We have been working on it the whole season against ourselves in practice so we'll be ready.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: I would say how aggressive they are and one-on-one defense and ball coverage. We hang our hat on defense and so do they. They're one of the best defenses in the country, but every possession is super aggressive. They feed off of turnovers and feed off of how good they play defense. So really just their aggressiveness.

**Q. Coach Sampson had some interesting and funny things to say about your phone calls. I'm just wondering what are the occasions when you know it's time to call Coach Sampson?**

RICK BARNES: We talk. Guys that know me, we'll be talking for a while and I'll finally say I'm done with you. I'm

out, you know? But we talk a lot. When we talk, Kelvin is the kind of friend that if we go weeks, months, whatever it may be, we just pick right back up. We know each other. We know where we're from and we know the route that we've come through coaching. I think where he started out and the way he's done it, it's just respect, and we'll talk ball some. Different things, and it's always hard playing against guys that you love, you grow up with because I know he wants to see us do well and win it, and I would say the same for them.

If we weren't playing them -- I just know him so well and his family and I'm really blessed to have a friend like that and a person that I know he cares, but the phone calls can vary from different things. We just... whatever, depending on what time of year it is.

**Q. Coach, obviously Tennessee has a special connection to Indianapolis and that is Peyton Manning. He was here last night, expecting him to be here tomorrow. How cool is it to be able to play a Midwest Regional in the house that Peyton built with his statue right outside?**

RICK BARNES: Well, obviously, what can you say about Peyton? He is one of the greatest people you could ever meet. Loves Tennessee, has been so loyal and generous to our university, not just to the athletic side but the university as a whole with the scholarships he provides for people, but, again, he's a person... he's a true Volunteer. When you think about what he does not only for those that are close to him, the people he might not even know, he's made things so much better for all of us at Tennessee and the fact that he's still so active out there, in some way, he's the voice of the University of Tennessee and we're proud of him.

**Q. I have a question for Felix and one for Chaz. Felix, what went into the rebounding you have had the past couple of games? And Chaz, how were you able to be so patient against Kentucky and take your time to get the shots you wanted?**

FELIX OKPARA: For me, it was just the coach challenging me and knowing that I got it in me, and just me putting more effort in that side of basketball and chase. That's what was in my head.

CHAZ LANIER: For me, it was looking at what the defense is giving me. I know most of my shots are going to be contested, so just ready to shoot when I have the opportunity.

**Q. For Jahmai and Zakai, how rare is it to flip on the film and find a team that plays about as hard as you**

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**do? I imagine this might be a time that you see a team that plays about as hard as you do.**

JAHMAI MASHACK: I think what makes them really successful, they have the personnel. They have really good guys that come in, do their jobs, focus on doing their jobs. They have length. They are all around the court. You can try and scheme as much as you want, but if you don't have the personnel and the guys to do it, it doesn't work out. I think that's what jumps out to me when I'm watching Houston. It doesn't matter what team I'm playing against. There's nobody tougher than me or this team, but we're still going to respect them as a tough team. We're going to play harder and tougher, but we have to respect them as such and go out and play hard.

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Yeah, much respect for Houston. Watching them on film, they play really hard. They play really tough, but we do the same thing. We hang our hats on toughness and defense, and as long as we do what we need to do, we'll be perfectly fine.

**Q. Question for Coach. Zakai's story at Tennessee feels like one that's going to become pretty rare in the modern state of college basketball. How much have you appreciated being a part of that and what can you say about what a player like that can mean to a university?**

RICK BARNES: What I would say is, knowing him, he would sell the rights to it (laughter).

It's really one of the great stories when you think about him and how it all started for us. Started in Augusta the last week of Peach Jam. It started long before that, to be honest with you. The fact that he would have to hop a bus. He knows New York City subways. He should go back and pay them for all the times he's jumped the rail to get home here and there and everything. He grew up a lot quicker than most kids need to grow up, and coming to campus, it took us about -- we thought we were going to red-shirt him. That's what we thought. He changed that real quick and made an incredible impact from the time that he's walked on campus.

But it's really one of the great stories and I said it before, I think he's going to go down as one of the all-time favorite Volunteers because of the way he's gone about his business every day. What you've seen during games, I have watched it for four years.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to dismiss the student-athletes. We will continue with Coach Barnes.

**Q. Coach, we talk about it every game, but Houston is**

**so physical. How much of an emphasis do you have in keeping them off the offensive glass tomorrow? How much of a challenge is that?**

RICK BARNES: Well, it's really hard. You can say you need more than one day. You could take a week, but that's not enough time either if you don't understand it. That's what they do every day. I know he's still doing that old bubble drill and putting that thing on that rim and the only way you can score points is to get a rebound. It's a mindset that he instills in them, and we try to do the same thing, obviously. I think he's recruited -- he's done a great job recruiting guys the way he wants to play and they go get it. If not, he's going to take them out. You got a job to do. You're going to do it. So whether you got a year, a week, a month, a year, whatever, a day, you got to be prepared knowing that's a huge part of how they play the game.

**Q. I want to ask, can you speak on the development of Zakai as a leader and how that has helped you as a head coach having a point guard like that that you can rely on and depend on?**

RICK BARNES: When I was talking when they were up here about some days we get along, some days we don't, all that... I think the best teams are when they're coached by the team. There are days that if I don't -- and I say "I". It's we. Our coaching staff, aren't doing the things we want done, I'm holding those guys responsible, too. Players need to coach players, and Zakai and Jahmai are two of the best. So there are days I'm getting on them about things that maybe Chaz isn't doing. I might say to them, hey, if Chaz isn't going to rebound, you're going to run for him. You're going to run the steps and do this and do that.

It's a standard in which, when you get a player like Zakai who came in, he wasn't a point guard when he came in. He's learned how to play that position. He's worked hard at it because he's a guy who could always score the ball.

We have expected a lot from him, from a leadership standpoint. He speaks in his own voice. He does it every day in practice. He doesn't have bad days in practice. He knows me well enough to know when I'm not happy with practice and he knows if he doesn't help change it, that he's going to get the backside of it more times than not, he and Jahmai. Because he's been around us and knows the standard set and they have been great at it. Again, the best-coached teams and best-led teams are coached and led by the players. He's worked hard over four years just to understand the game from all different areas.

We have never been a big heavy ball-screen team. Probably done more this year than in the past. He's

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worked hard at adding anything we've asked him to do. He's been willing to take it on and do it.

**Q. Kind of previously touched on this a little bit, but Kelvin Sampson was talking about how much he still loves coaching this game and that there is a minority of horror stories within NIL and transfer portal that I think a lot of people maybe run with it more and it gets more attention, but just from your aspect of it, when he talked about coming towards the end of his career, but he said this is a game he loved and it's still pure in his mind. Can you expand upon your thoughts on it?**

RICK BARNES: I would agree. He and I and a group of guys in it for a long time, Tom Izzo, Cal, a lot of us, in some ways we're cut from the same cloth, but like Kelvin, again, I still think the game is a pure game, a beautiful game, and I love coaching it. I think with the NIL, I can see it if you're at a university where the administration doesn't get it. We all want to win. I've always believed, too, if you want to coach, coach anywhere. If you want to coach, coach junior high. Coach high school. If you really love it, just coach. I'm extremely blessed to have had to serve a great God who has given me an opportunity to be at some wonderful places, but with what's going on right now... right now, the rumors I'm hearing, it's absolutely mind-boggling. It is. But that's not going to keep us from doing our job, and I couldn't care less about it right now. Even though we're working at it. I have staff working on the things you're talking about right now. You can't fall behind. We're in the middle of trying to win a National Championship like the other teams right now, but yet there's a group working hard on making sure we don't fall behind with the portal. And what's the first thing? What's the number? You can't let that interfere with the fact that you love doing what you're doing. I have made it, I think, clear that -- the day that I lose that purity of not wanting to be around the kids or the players and coach, that's when you know it's time.

But I still love it like Kelvin. When we talk on the phone, you can still hear it in his voice that he hasn't let down. He still wants to help -- we really want to help these guys have a chance. We've lived our dream. We want to help those guys do it. The way you do it, you give them your best every day. That means total transparency, honesty and knowing that there's days that maybe they don't want to hear it, but the good ones always do. They always come back for more.

**Q. Coach, I asked the guys about it, but for you as a coach, what's the comfort level of having Jahmai and Zakai here who have been in the exact same position last year?**

RICK BARNES: It is, and the fact that they have been

here. They know how quickly it can end. They realize it. They knew coming in. They knew how hard the first game against Wofford would be. That's a hard game. Everybody knows if you can get by the first one, it gets more difficult every round.

But it goes back to what I was saying earlier about the accountability that we expect in those guys, as much as we're going to do our jobs as coaches for the guys that haven't been here, they're spending time with them, telling them, and that peer pressure is powerful. It helps when Jahmai and Zakai and Jordan have been here and they're able to say, hey, this is what it's going to take because they spend a lot of time without us in the locker room prior to the game. They might be in their own world a little bit. They know how to touch each other and hot buttons and understand that we got to be ready.

**Q. Rick, Kelvin said if we don't win it, I want Rick to win it. Is it safe to assume you feel the same way?**

RICK BARNES: Well, what I would say is this: Obviously I'm in a league and I like to see our league have success, whether people believe that or not, but from a personal standpoint, when you've grown up with a guy like Kelvin and Tom's won it... yeah. We would love to win it but I would love to see Kelvin Sampson win a National Championship. Not this year, you know? But I love the guy. I just think about the first time I went out there I think they put me on a futon in their house and from that time, Karen -- he's got a beautiful wife and their kids, I watched their kids grow and it's just tough, but I'm a huge Kelvin Sampson fan. Always will be.

**Q. A lot of people talked that the Big 12 was one of the best basketball conferences at the start of the year and now they've moved to the SEC being the best basketball conference. What does this mean for both conferences this matchup specifically?**

RICK BARNES: Leagues cycle. This year was the year of the SEC. When you think about the historic non-league schedule, the success we had in the non-league and doing what we did thus far in the tournament, I have seen great leagues cycle through. I'd like to think now that the traction that we've gotten that we can continue to grow it, the league, and every year I think it's all coaches. You would love to be in a league when you think that, hey, every year we play good basketball. We got 14 teams in. We can do it every year if we can stay there. But it's been one of those historic years for our league. That goes back from 10 years ago where we were, it's amazing that we got it here at this point, but it's tough. It's been a long grind it seems like from January, but it's turned out okay.

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**Q. How do you go as a head coach preparing your team with five days' preparation in between the second round, the Sweet 16 to only one day of preparation between the Sweet 16 and the Elite Eight?**

RICK BARNES: After the first round, second round, rest. Right now I think the most important thing is rest. I was fortunate to be at the -- it took me a long time to learn this, and I still fight it every single day, but Eddie Reese, the greatest women's coach of all time at the University of Texas told me one day, he told me, you know, I have never seen a coach take a mule and make him a racehorse, but I've watched a lot of horses take racehorses and make them a mule. I've been guilty of that... a lot. This time of year you want racehorses. The biggest thing is trying to keep them healthy and I'm not sure everybody is totally healthy right now, the little bangs and bruises that you have. From last night to today, that's the mindset.

And then Coach Knight had a wonderful saying. It took me forever to figure it out. He said the mental to the physical is like four is to one. Today that four into one comes into play big-time. The mental part of it. You don't have time to go out and put a bubble up and try to work on blocking out against Houston. You don't. You just gotta hope you've done enough up to this point with your practices and you trust your system, you trust your habits, but it's emphasizing everything from a fundamental standpoint of the game saying this is something we have to do to do. This is something -- whether it's ball screen, rebound, whatever it may be. I think the most important thing in a one-day prep is to get our legs back and be ready to know that's what it's going to take to play against a team that comes at you like they do.

MODERATOR: Time for a couple more for, Coach. Okay. Seeing none, thank you.

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