

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

Sunday, March 30, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers
Coach Rick Barnes
Zakai Zeigler
Jahmai Mashack
Jordan Gainey

Elite Eight Postgame Media Conference



Houston 69, Tennessee 50

THE MODERATOR: We'll take an opening statement from you and then we'll go to anybody up here on the dais.

RICK BARNES: Again, congratulations to Kelvin and his Houston team. They were -- Houston, they do what they do. That's why they're where they are, that's the standard of their program. First half obviously got away from us. Their second-chance opportunities were big and we felt like we got some shots, but we didn't knock down some of those early, but we weren't able to get anything really inside. But, again, the second-chance points early, when you're shooting as poorly as we were, those were hard. The second-chance points are hard to overcome, but just incredibly blessed and grateful and have a chance to sit here with this group of guys, and there's 10,000 coaches that would love to be where we are right now. Even though we're disappointed with our loss, players would like to be sitting here. When you have two guys in particular who have been with us for four years and Zakai Zeigler and Jahmai Mashack, when we look back, I think they will be the two most accomplished Tennessee Volunteer players ever. We owe it to them to continue with the standard they have set, or even take it to another level. Our goal, like every team, would be to get back here and move forward. But, again, with Jordan coming in, just became part of the fabric very quickly.

It's tough because, as badly as we all want it, it always hurts if you don't get it all. I do know this: This team gave us every possible thing they could. Every day in practice,

they represented the University of Tennessee the way we want it represented, and I can only count it as a major blessing from God that I got to spend the time I did with two of these guys for four years and Jordan for the last two. The other guys in the locker room, with the transfer portal, some of them never being through this, never being part of the NCAA Tournament, came into their role. Our walk-ons did an incredible job, some days only having eight guys in practice. We talk about a team, this team truly did, it's overused sometimes, but they really did become a family and they fought until the very end for each other.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For Zakai and Jahmai, how do you balance the highs from this season with the heartbreak from today?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Well, you know, we have done some things this season that some people can never say they have done in their life, you know. Making March Madness is a huge blessing. Making the Elite Eight, Sweet 16, round of 32, we did some things that some people in their life can never say they got close to.

I'm just thankful, really, that I have been able to be around guys like this and be coached by the coaches that have been here with me. We have had some highs and lows this season, but I don't feel like we folded at all through it all. Through it all, we became a brotherhood. When we first got together this season, it was weird. It was weird and a lot of different personalities, and for it to get to this point and for everybody on this team to be able to call them brothers and to actually mean it, it means something to me.

These are people I'm going to talk to for the rest of my life, people that I love. These are my brothers, and today we didn't get the outcome that we wanted and, you know, it was all part of God's plan. We're thankful for the opportunity and all the blessings that we went through this whole season.

A lot of people don't really realize everything that we've been through... guys transferring, guys getting hurt. Some days in practice getting down to eight scholarship guys, seven scholarship guys, and not realizing that -- we're saying this to y'all, but y'all don't realize how hard that

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really is for each and every one of us, including the coaches.

I love these guys to death. They're people that changed my life and I just love these guys to death and I'm just thankful that I was part of a team like this.

JAHMAI MASHACK: I was going to do this if we won. I told myself I was going to do this if we won or if we lost. I'm going to give all the glory to God. He's put me in this situation and I wouldn't be who I was if I didn't do that first and foremost, whether I lost or whatever.

It's really hard to say or think about any of the highs because I wanted to win so bad, especially for these guys right here, for the Vol fan base. It's hard. I'd been telling everybody since I got here, this is something that we represent, but this is something I have done my whole life. It's really not about me. I don't care about getting any of the glory. I don't care about getting any of the accolades, nothing like that. I just care about shining the light on this guy right here and these two guys right here. I seen them put in so much work. I seen Coach Barnes be the most consistent person. Even though we fight and get into it, we get right back to practice and coaching. He loves to coach me and he knows how much I put in this game. I really wanted to get there for him. I wanted people to realize how good of a coach he is. Sometimes communication can be off between him and the players and that happens, but, man, I just wanted to get there for him. I wanted to get there for the Vol fans, man. I wanted them to have something that they could be proud of, you know what I mean? And it's hard. It's hard, but we're going to have to fight through it.

These guys are my brothers for life. It feels weird not being able to play with Zakai anymore. Been doing that for four years. That's been my guy for four years. I'm never going to play with nobody like him, man. That's my brother. We get into it a lot. We joke around with each other a lot. He knows I joke with him, he jokes with me. That's just how we bond, but I don't take that for granted. These are going to be my brothers for life.

Same thing with Jordan. One of the easiest guys to talk to. One of the easiest guys to get along with, and it's just tough, man. I love these guys, man.

Q. This is for Jordan. A tale of two halves, scoring hard to come by in that first half. You played around 12, 13 minutes, had four points. In the second half, a few more minutes than that, but got double-digit numbers in 13 for 17 in the game. Just your thoughts on the difference between the first half and the second half?

JORDAN GAINEY: Really started to be more aggressive getting downhill in the second half and just playing basketball freely, getting the ball side to side on the court is what we do and we did that the second half and good things happened.

Q. For Zakai, it's been an amazing career for you in Knoxville, SEC Defensive Player of the Year, SEC Record Holder For Assists. What can you say about your legacy and the stamp you're leaving in Knoxville?

ZAKAI ZEIGLER: Well, coming into Knoxville, I didn't have any expectations for anything like that. All I did was ask Coach Barnes for a chance and he gave it to me. The mark that they left on me and my family, they changed our lives, really. I'm just so thankful for each and every person that's a part of Vol Nation. I'm so thankful for the coaches, so thankful for my teammates, so thankful for everybody that's part of Tennessee as a whole. Accolades, I couldn't do anything like that without my teammates. I couldn't do anything like that without my coaches.

The mark that Tennessee has left on me is really crazy to just think about. It's been the best four years of my life... changed my life, and I feel like Knoxville is a place I'll call home forever. So everything that I've done there, everything that they've done for me has been nothing less than great and I wouldn't even say ups and downs. Everything has been up, really. Vol Nation, I love you guys and I appreciate everything they've done for me and my family. Appreciate the coaches and I appreciate my teammates.

THE MODERATOR: We have time for about three more questions right here.

Q. Coach, just as well as you guys handled Friday night, did you feel like that first half could happen as good as you played under the pressure?

RICK BARNES: No, I don't think you expect it to happen, you know? Again, I thought our coaches did the job that they always do, preparing our guys, and we came out and, again, we knew it would be difficult. We knew that they had an inside out game and we often -- you look at our team, mostly perimeter-oriented. We knew there would be a strong focus there. We knew they would honestly do exactly what they did. We dealt with it this year, you're hoping you're making some of those shots, but when you're not, you don't want to give up. We know they're an outstanding rebounding team. Take away just half of those in the first half and you make a couple -- and we had some looks. We didn't make them, but that's part of it. But even with that said, I still felt at halftime if we could go back and

put some things together, but it's hard when you're not able to go inside and get some easier baskets or put some pressure on the rim. We have to do that with our penetration game, too, trying to get fouled. Obviously they keyed heavily on their guards, but I don't think you come out thinking it could happen. You come out expecting to play at a high level.

But we've been down before and I knew -- the one thing I did know, I knew our guys wouldn't quit playing. I knew we had to start scrambling because if you really watch the game closely, Houston is a possession team. They're going to come down and they're not worried about getting down the floor quick. They're going to run their sets and we wanted to take advantage of those first 10, 15 seconds of the clock and try to speed them up and turn them over. The shots they hit there at the end when we cut it down, that's the one you're giving up and hope they don't make it, and they did. But, again, the effort was there. Again, I just feel so hurt for these guys because, again, I know they wanted to do better and play better.

Q. Threes were hard to come by that first half, Zeigler hit one with 30 seconds to go and Houston came out and scored real quick, 21 down. Then you outscored them 18-10. Just talk about the drive and your players as you just commented on, they never quit.

RICK BARNES: If you know these guys, and we see it every day in practice and I've said it before, it's a blessing when you get to go to practice and not have to coach effort from your best players for certain. They're the ones that everybody looks at, but when you go out, that would be the least thing on my mind with these guys. It's never going to be about effort. It's going to be about them getting their teammates to understand the effort they had to play with to get us where we needed to go. When we were down, all you have to do is look in their eyes and know that they're disappointed, but they want to keep fighting, they want to keep doing it.

Like when Z came off, it hurt me because I knew how much he cared. He said "I'm sorry" but he's got nothing to be sorry about. He gave us everything. And what Shack said, I know those guys. They know I'm an older guy. They know I would love to win a National Championship, but they have absolutely not one thing to hang their head down or be sorry about because they had truly -- we have a slogan at Tennessee, give your all for Tennessee. They did that. In more ways than you can imagine. Regardless whether we were down 20 or 25, they would continue to give their all for the University of Tennessee because they're such a huge part of where this program is right now.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, thank you, Coach. Good luck.

