

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Wednesday, October 19, 2022

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Rick Barnes

Men's Media Day Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin our session with Coach Barnes next at Tennessee. We'll start with questions.

Q. Wanted to ask you -- this was kind of a revelation to me, but learned about it on social media, your relationship with Dick Vitale. Of course, Dick has his ongoing health problems, but he shared your interaction and really a tribute to the friendship the two of you have built. I would like you to address that and then talk about Dick and what he means to the game, if you could.

RICK BARNES: Joe, obviously, I met Dick back in the '80s. As you know, he has really been the voice of college basketball, but we would have our Midnight Madness at Providence College, and we would have Dick come up and do our Midnight Madness.

One of the big highlights would be that we would have our students have a Dick Vitale sound-alike. It was one of the biggest hits that we had.

Obviously, through the years his love for college basketball and his love for people and certainly what he has done for pediatric cancer, but when he got sick and a friend of mine, Tommy Batamarco [phonetic], and he and I were talking, and I reached out and texted him. He texted me back, and he said, What I need are prayers. I said, I promise you I'll pray for every day. I just decided the prayers that I was praying for him I would text to him.

Through that time -- and he would -- again, the days -- he always texts me back regardless of how he felt, what he was going through. Then this year going down to his gala, being a part of that. Again, just knowing how much -- as much as he wanted to get back to college basketball was his enthusiasm to want to do what he has done for, again, pediatric cancer and through his gala there and watching how he got back.



I just texted him just the other day, and he is excited about this coming basketball season and asked for prayers to be able to get through the whole thing.

But he is more enthusiastic than ever. I don't think any of us can really thank him for what he has done for our student body.

When he comes around and comes in to do games, it brings an extra element of excitement, I think, to the campus, to the game. I know our students love it.

When he is in the building, they're all there early hoping they can catch a photo with him and do those type things. But I'm glad he is healthy. Again, I think I speak for everyone and would thank him for what he has done for our college and our collegiate game.

Q. A couple of big-picture things in college basketball. Some big ideas that are out there. I wanted get your thoughts on the summer basketball. One, your friend Cal is big about, and some other folks want to expand the NCAA tournament field. What do you think about both of those ideas?

RICK BARNES: The summer basketball, Cal and I have talked about it. I think what that stems from is we think that we do get tired of practicing, and we need to practice. We need that time, but we would also like to have a little more outside competition at some point in time.

I personally wish that we had more exhibition games this time of year. Again, if we want to take the NBA Summer League model for the summer, we should also think about what they do with their preseason because not only do we need it, I think referees need it.

I think it would really help officiating. They could get more work in before we actually get into games because these early tournament games mean a lot. For some situations they've only had a game or two under their belt when that starts. Maybe that might be their first one.

I think players would tell you, we all are more for playing games. So I think, again, it's good. I do. During the summer, I think I would probably use it in a way to let my



coaches coach the game. Just like the format they have used in the NBA Summer League. I would really like to see this time of year -- we're playing Gonzaga in an exhibition game in Texas in a couple of weeks. I wish we could play probably four preseason games, if it were up to me, to allow us to get that outside competition before we started. I think it would cut down on the grind of this time of year being in the gym.

As far as the NCAA tournament, I think expansion would be great. I believe the way the tournament touches every state in our country, I just think you go back and look at how teams that have played in games that have made some runs, how Ole Miss in football comes back and they win the national championship in baseball, and I think that they were the last team in.

Yeah, I would be for expanding it. How you do that, I'm not sure exactly, but it's a great time of year, and it's hard to get there. You don't ever take it for granted. I can tell you that. I do think it will be expanded at some point in time, but I do hope that we, again, add some games here or there for not only for us but for refereeing as well, officiating.

Q. Talk about the two guys you brought with you today. They took a peek at the next level, but they're back. The stability maybe that they bring and the leadership that they can help you with the rest of the team.

RICK BARNES: When you think about Santi Vescovi and Josiah James, it seems like they've been with us forever, and I would like to keep them forever because of what they do, the way they go about their business. They have a professional mentality in terms of not only what they do with basketball, but the things they do off the court and their leadership with our team.

We talked a year ago about needing more leadership. We really felt at the end of the year or really in the middle of the year that those guys started doing that.

Why is Cal being so loud? Huh? He is starting to distract me again, you know?

The fact is those guys have meant a lot to our program. Josiah came in at a time when we really had a tough time. We were in a transition period there. He has seen us grow probably as much as anybody.

Santi came in that year. We thought we were going to red-shirt him, but because of Lamonte's injury, we had to push him right in there, and he has never looked back.

Q. What's the biggest question that you still need to have answered about this team three weeks out?

RICK BARNES: Going into the year, I would have told you that our post players, and I do think they've all improved, but still the question will be how consistent we can become.

I think as a team I do feel like we can shoot the ball well, but we know there's going to be nights when shots aren't going in, and it will be how do we handle those situations?

Defensively we expect to be a good defensive team, but we think that we have more depth than we've had in a long time, quality depth that we think that we can play and versatility.

The question I think anybody would have with us right now is what kind of production that we can get from our post players consistently. So that's what we'll wait and see.

Q. Rick, you guys got Oscar three times last season. Just what makes him so difficult to stop, and what did you learn about doing that over those three meetings?

RICK BARNES: Well, he does a great job of fighting for his space on the floor. He knows where he wants the ball, and he is so quick, twitch from his shoulders getting the ball up over his head. He has terrific touch around the basket. If you get him position in there, he just knows how to work his body.

If you're not ready early to defend him, he is going to put it on you. He is shooting the ball. He started making that little 15-, 17-foot jumper last year. But the biggest thing I would say is he is just so effective.

You almost need two guys to block him out because, again, he has that great second and third jump, quick-twitch muscles to get up and get it. I love the fact that when he catches it, he gets it out of his hands real quick and makes it hard to defend.

Q. Nice of those guys to quiet down a little bit.

RICK BARNES: That's asking the impossible.

Q. I was wondering, as a veteran coach like yourself who has been in the league for quite a while, what was it like maybe at the spring meetings to see six new faces early? Mike White was one of the guys that was at a different school. What did you think about that, the turnover? Then, you have coached against Eric Musselman now a few times. What do you think about the job that he is doing at Arkansas? He signed three

McDonald's All-Americans.

RICK BARNES: When I came in the league, it seemed like we had four or five new coaches that came in when I came into the league. This league has grown so quickly and fast in terms of -- I think we've always had terrific coaches in this league.

But with the new guys, like you said, this year, I've been around a long time, and I've seen a lot of change in all the different leagues throughout the years, but you fully know this: In all my time, I could tell you, I don't think I've ever coached against a team where I didn't think the coach was a really good basketball coach and you knew exactly what they were trying to get done.

In terms of Eric, Eric does a terrific job in terms of playing the game the way he wants to play it. He will pick out those mismatches that he wants, and he will attack you in certain ways.

Last year I think he just does a great job of putting his players in position to where they can be most successful. He, obviously, knows who he wants to go after too on the defensive end.

Offensively from our standpoint last year, you know, he was the one guy that played that real deep drop coverage, terrific with that rearview contest, which not a lot of teams in college basketball has done that.

Now I think he has done it a little bit different now where he has gone with younger guys, which I'm sure, again, we all, I think, like to coach younger guys. Especially if they want to be coached because we feel we can help them a lot.

When I look at our league this year with all the coaches in general, they've all had success or they wouldn't be here. The fact is I think every year this time of year we get together, coaches. We all probably think days are going to be pretty good, and other days we wonder how good can we be because there's so much practice time and it's tough for players to maintain every day, especially when you start scrimmaging when you don't have enough guys to sub when you really are trying to assimilate a 32, 40-minute game.

But I know this: Any coach that's in this league, he has been successful somewhere. So we've got to get ready to play against some different styles of basketball. Like Cal and I played against each other a long time. We probably know each other as well as we know what we're doing.

When young coaches come in the league, we'll do a lot of scouting early. We've already started that, to be quite

frank, with where they were, what they play, and we'll wait and see how much of that carries over in terms of what they're trying to get done, where they are right now with their jobs in this league.

Q. You mentioned defense when you were talking about consistency. Where is this team in terms of progressing to where you want them to be defensively?

RICK BARNES: I always tell our team when we're practicing and there aren't subs and we're really going up and down the floor, I tell them, I say, I'm not going to worry about the defense until we're able to put the whole team together. We're doing our drills, doing our fundamental work.

The one thing for certain is once we start playing games and when we're expecting you to play on both ends, if you're not playing defense, you're not going to stay in the game very long.

But we're doing the things that we've always done. Like every year, we tweak some things here or there with not only our defense, but with our offense. I do think that we have a chance to be another really good defensive team.

How good yet, Mike, I don't know, other than the fact I know we've got some guys that are very competitive. The way we're trying to play on offense, spread the floor as much as we can. Then when you play against those packed line defenses, so we'll have to have the ability to do a little bit of all of that. That's what we're doing with our team now, the different ball screen coverages that we're working on.

I think we have a chance to be good at it because we've got some older guys that have been through it and older guys can make the adjustments. Younger guys, not so much right now. We're just trying to get them into a base package that the older guys we can do more things with.

Q. Obviously, the SEC had a lot of teams have great seasons last year, but didn't have a lot of teams advance far in NCAA tournament. Is it fair to judge about by that? Were you surprised that there was only one left standing after the first weekend?

RICK BARNES: I can only tell you from my experience in the tournament. I think I'm like any coach. I love to say, hey, we've had great success that time of year. I can tell you I've had three teams in my career that I thought we had a chance to win national championship.

With that said, all those other years, I thought it was as



equal with us as anyone else. There's some years, there's some teams you just know that they're good enough, and if something crazy doesn't happen, they're going to be there.

I don't know if the NCAA Tournament surprises me about anything right now because you go back down the history of the tournament, we've had a 16-seed be all the way down. I'm not surprised by any of that.

Because on a one-shot deal, that's what makes college basketball different and the NCAA Tournament different from anything else out there, in the fact it's not a 2 out of 3, 3 out of 4, 4 out of 7, 3 out of 5, 4 out of 7. It's a one-shot deal.

And in 40 minutes, when you are dealing with young people, believe me, anything can happen. We've seen teams catch lightning in a bottle. We've seen where stress has come in and been a factor with teams that are on the verge of an upset, those type of things. I'm not surprised by any of it.

I think when I would tell you when you are most surprised is when you see a team that you just think they've got to have absolutely everything to go against them not to get where they need to go. Over the last couple of years, there haven't been many teams like that.

Q. Obviously, you've coached against Mike White and his Florida teams over the last couple of years. What stands out to you about him and his coaching style?

RICK BARNES: Consistency, hard work. His teams are going to battle you hard. They're not going to beat themselves.

Mike is a terrific coach. I thought he did a terrific job at Florida. He's at Georgia now where he is going to -- I'm sure he is going to do what he does. That's what we all do. We understand how we want to play. He'll make the adjustment he has to with his team until he can -- as he continues to build what he wants to build it at Georgia.

But terrific coach. Really is. I love the way he goes about his business in recruiting and a guy that, again, he's going to be successful.

Q. What attracted you to Santiago Vescovi, and has he improved in the areas that you think he should?

RICK BARNES: Stacey what attracted us is we are kind of attracted to good players. We liked that. And Ken McDonald through his NBA experience and Ken had played for me at Providence and then he was on our staff and knew people through the NBA Academy. We knew we

were in need of a point guard player.

So we started recruiting him. He could have stayed back still another year, but then he thought about maybe coming in the middle of the year, getting his feet on the ground, and learning the system.

The time when he came in, he wasn't in shape, but we knew from watching him and doing our intel on him that he was a guy that would fit the culture that we had, we wanted. We knew he wanted to be good. We knew he wanted work at it.

Obviously, when you saw him play early, you knew he had a terrific basketball IQ, understood the game. When he came on campus, we weren't sure. Even when he came in right after Christmas, we were getting ready to open up SEC play. And when Lamonte Turner decided that he couldn't finish the year. He had an injury and just couldn't go. We asked Santi, Do you want to do this? With two days, he went out and his first game was right in the SEC.

Had a great night shooting the basketball, but wasn't in the kind of shape that he needed to be, but as time went on... Now I'm not sure there is a more elite conditioned basketball player than Santi. He can play. He is a player he could play 40 minutes every night.

He is really the kind of guy that knows what he has to do to get himself ready. Obviously, people look at him shooting-wise, but I think the way he passes and cuts, he is at an elite level with that, but his IQ is off the charts.

The things that he does talking to his players throughout the game when we're in -- just in random flow motion, the things that he does to help his teammates is pretty neat to watch.

Q. You mentioned last year how you thought Zakai's development was really accelerated because he went one-on-one with Kennedy in practice. I'm just curious if you have seen maybe any of that this offseason with any of your newcomers?

RICK BARNES: I think this summer it really helped BJ Edwards and Tyreke Key to have to deal with Zakai every day. Santi and Olivier and a couple of those guys were away during the summer with their national teams. Zakai was there, and those guys coming in having to deal with that I think has helped those guys. Because what you guys see Zakai do in a game, that's who he is every day in practice.

Again, like Santi could play all day, doesn't want to come out, but I thought that the impact watching those two guys

being defended by him and then having to defend him really helped them a lot. I think they would tell you that too.

Certainly Kennedy would tell you that Zakai had a terrific impact on him a year ago in the way that he goes about it every single day.

But, again, I'd like to take -- our staff take credit for it, but it's just in Zakai's DNA. He is one of the most competitive people I've ever been around in any way.

When things aren't going well, he is really hard on himself. He just wants to -- if he makes mistakes, and one of the things I've talked to him about, he wants to get it back quick. He sort of takes it personal, which I think a lot of great players do when things aren't going well, they take it personal.

He is highly competitive. Maybe one of the most competitive guys. Certainly one of the most competitive guys we've ever coached.

Q. What have you learned about your team in the first three weeks of practice that excites you the most?

RICK BARNES: I think that, again, a team that's willing to share the ball and move the ball. We take a lot of pride in assisting on baskets. We do think we can shoot the ball consistently well.

We're hoping that we're going to be able to score at every level at a more consistent basis this year, but I would still go back to the camaraderie that they have and the way that they are willing to compete against each other every day and go at it extremely hard. Then when it's over with, they take care of each other, look out for each other, and get ready to come back the next day and do it again.

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