

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Hawaii vs Arkansas

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Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

Arkansas Razorbacks

Coach John Calipari

Darius Acuff Jr.

D.J. Wagner

Media Conference



this journey has been like and what you've learned most about yourself?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: It's been a great journey, for sure. I would say throughout those couple months, a lot of learning, for sure.

But that's what you come here for. But no, it's been great just learning from veterans like him, the coaching staff we have. It's been great, for sure.

Q. D.J., Cal was quick to compliment you in the SEC Championship game. What does it mean when he's so vocal and boisterous about you consistently?

D.J. WAGNER: It mean a lot. Especially coming from a coach like him, such a legendary coach. It mean a lot. A lot of people dream to play for him.

Just to get complimented by him and stuff like that, it mean a lot.

Q. We've been talking all season about if the NCAA tournament should expand. What do you think? Should we have more than 68 teams?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: This is my first year, so I don't really have much to say on that. But you have to ask certain coaches. I wouldn't really have an opinion on it. I don't really know.

D.J. WAGNER: Yeah, same really. The same (smiling).

Q. Darius from Detroit area, D.J. from New Jersey. This is your first time in Oregon?

D.J. WAGNER: No.

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Been here in high school for camps.

D.J. WAGNER: Yeah, same, I've been here a couple time, different occasions. Basketball, of course.

Q. (No microphone.)

D.J. WAGNER: Yes, ma'am.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined on the podium by Arkansas student-athletes. The room is open for questions.

Q. Darius, how have you managed to stay composed despite the accolades that keep coming your way?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Just knowing the season is not over yet. Still got more to go. No, just staying focused, making sure I'm staying locked into the team so we can win more games.

Q. Coach is going to come up here and he's known when he gets in front of a microphone to talk for a long time. What is he like in the locker room? Do your team meetings take multiple hours 'cause he's giving a soliloquy?

D.J. WAGNER: No, I want to say coach, he who he is. That's just who he is. He himself no matter where he at. No matter if it's in the locker room, up here, on the court. He's just always him.

He just likes to motivate us. Our meetings don't take too long. He just like to get whatever he want to get off his chest.

Q. (No microphone.)

D.J. WAGNER: No, I wouldn't say. Most of the time he get straight to the point.

Q. Darius, from games in November to now, the postseason awards, are you able to summarize what



Q. Darius, if long-time Arkansas fans were to add you to their list of favorites throughout history, what would that mean?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: It would mean a lot. I always say I love our fans. We got great fans. They support you no matter what, win or lose. They always going to support you.

It would definitely mean a lot. Arkansas had a lot of legends come through. It would definitely mean a lot, for sure.

Q. Darius, you've been so good late in games this season. What are the emotions like, what are you thinking end of a game? Can you feel like you take your level to another notch when the clock is winding down?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Yeah, I really just say trying to win, no matter what the time is. Around that time of course is winning time. Just always making the right play, that's important to me. Whatever I need to do to get our team to win, whether it's me passing or me shooting or getting a stop, you know, I'm going to do it.

Q. D.J., Hawaii has a big team, but that extends to their back court. What do you see from their back court and size? What is the key matching up with them?

D.J. WAGNER: It's all about the game plan, just seeing what coach tells us, just executing the game plan, whatever coach want us to do.

We know they're a good team, very well-coached team. I mean, they're here for a reason. Really seeing what coach want to do, executing. Most importantly, staying focused on ourselves. That's something coach been saying, just be as best as we can be, focus on ourselves.

Q. Darius, with you mentioning those legends, have you been able to talk to any former players, whether Cal has them through practice, when you were coming in at all this past year?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Yeah, he had a couple former players showed up to our practices before the season. But no, I haven't really got a chance to talk to them personally.

Like I said, they support us, for sure, through media. I see that a lot, for sure. Like I said, there's a lot of legends that wear the Arkansas jersey.

Q. Cal has a long line of NBA players. Are any of

those guys reaching out? Any relationships there?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: No, I wouldn't say like reaching out. Like I said, through the media you see them supporting Coach Cal. He had a lot of great, great point guards, great forwards, whatever. He got legends, so...

They always supporting us. You see Twitter or Instagram, you see it. There's always love, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you for your time. Best of luck tomorrow.

D.J. WAGNER: Thank y'all.

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Arkansas head coach John Calipari. We'll begin with an opening statement from you.

JOHN CALIPARI: Excited to bring this team to the tournament. They've really gotten better. They've gotten closer. They've been challenged every possible way.

We've had injuries. We've kind of withstood all that stuff. But this is one-game deals, so it's hard. It's hard for every team. It will be hard for us.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. I wanted to ask you not about your game tomorrow, but I was curious when Rod Strickland took the LIU job, he had been on your staff. He wasn't an assistant coach. Did you talk when he was thinking about that job? What did you think of him taking that job?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, first of all, we got connected. I knew Rod, but I had a player of mine moving to DC to work for FedEx, needed a place to stay. I called Rod. I said, Do you have any ideas? He said, He can stay at my place. I still have the place there.

I said, You're kidding me.

No.

I said, Rod, I'm always going to be here for you. If you take care of one of mine, I will help you in any way I can.

Well, he calls me a year or two later and says, I want to get into coaching.

I said, You're with me, let's go.

What you find out, Rod was the one when I had Tyreke Evans said to me, Do you want to hear the good news or



the bad news?

I said, Give me the good news.

He said, The good news is Tyreke has the ball 75% of the time.

I said, What's the bad news?

He needs it 85% of the time.

We went on a run. He was unbelievable. Ends up being the Rookie of the Year in the NBA, Tyreke did.

But that was Rod. What it tells you is his feel for the game and feel for players is off the charts. He had a tough job, but he overcame that.

Doing what he did, getting them in the NCAA tournament. I hit him right away. He was honored by DePaul. They put his name in the rafters, his number. A lot of good things happening to a good person.

Thank you for asking that.

Q. Classic hometown honk question here. You had a nice tweet about Portland the other day. When you recruited Terrence Jones, is that when you spent the most time here?

JOHN CALIPARI: One of the most talented -- and I better not say about his son, I'm probably not able to -- but he was one of those, wherever you needed him to play. When we won the national title, he rolled his ankle. Go back and look, so bad a normal human would have said, I can't go.

He hit the floor twice and got up and finished the game. We won the national title. He was a big part of that.

So yes, I can't remember the name of the high school, but I do remember this: I had to have a wool cap on, 'cause it was a morning practice, and I could see my breath in the gym, in the gym. They had sweat suits on. It was like, do they have heat out here? What's going on (smiling)?

I was out here a lot. I come out for the Summit game. I've been out here. As a matter of fact, I've been in hotels where I've done recruiting after that game, so...

Q. Hawaii's size in the front court, a lot has been made of that. What do you see from their front court? Have you spoken with your bigs about challenging them to have to be ready for this game?

JOHN CALIPARI: They're not only big, they can shoot it. Now you've got bigs that can shoot the ball that are long, that are 7 foot tall. It's also our guards understanding how they play.

Like I said, I watched a lot of tape. They're really good. They play their way. Offensively they run great stuff. They play through bigs. Their guards, fade screen. They do all kind of good stuff.

But it's going to be a challenge. Every game in this thing is a challenge. Every game is a little bit different. How they play pick and roll, then you got to start the game and see if they've made adjustments because of us.

They're going to do this and this, and they don't do it. They do it a different way. They've never played zone. Okay, now they're playing some zone. That stuff happens within the game.

But they're big. I saw them play Irvine, and both teams were big. I'm like, Where in the heck did these 7-footers come from?

Q. Is Darius still in that boot at times? How close to full strength is he?

JOHN CALIPARI: He's not been in a boot for a while, but he gets dinged up because of how he plays. I tried to sit him out earlier. We had lost a game in double overtime. He had 50 or whatever he had. I said, Why don't you sit out the next game. It went to double overtime.

He looked at me and he said, We lost, I'm not sitting out.

So then when I got him to sit out, we had to go back and forth. Tell me why you think I should. I think I can do it.

I said, because I need you fresher. We needed him in the SEC tournament run to be that guy. So I'm glad I did it.

I took a chance. We did the NBA load management. Sit back, let us try to win a game without you. But if he's hurt, you won't know 'cause he doesn't do that. I looked at him. He said, Don't look over here, I'm fine.

Q. Your players, most of your fans, may not be as familiar with Hawaii as a program, the basketball coach. You've been out there for the Maui Invitational.

JOHN CALIPARI: Rainbow. You covered me.

Q. I was there in those games, that whole tournament.

JOHN CALIPARI: Were you there for the Rainbow stuff?



Q. Yes, I was there.

JOHN CALIPARI: You must have been four years old. How old were you?

Q. I was actually out of college.

JOHN CALIPARI: You're older than I thought. Go ahead (smiling).

Q. Anyway, what can you share about your experiences taking your teams to Hawaii and the basketball culture there, just your overall experience with Hawaii basketball.

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, again, we did play in the Maui I think a couple different times. We played in the Rainbow. Being there and being able to deal with that whole environment and be able to enjoy it, then see the fans who were so committed to the program and to the coaches and to the players. It's kind of unique in what they do and how they do it.

I think their fans know how good this team is. What is their record?

Q. 24-8.

JOHN CALIPARI: If you win that many games, you have a really good team. They have a really good team. They've got size and they can shoot the ball. They've got guard play.

But no, I have fond memories of those. That's a long trip from where I'd been to go out there and play now. I'd do an exhibition out there maybe. Stay a week, have a couple games, but...

Q. How do you think you've evolved? I won't go your entire career, but over the last 10 or 15 years, to have prolonged success. What about you will never change?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, the guys that played for me at UMass, the Harper Williams, those guys, Lou Roe, shouldn't have started, Edgar Padilla, Carmelo Travieso, Donta Bright, Dana Dingle. Should I keep going? They say I got soft. They look at me and said, You are soft.

The guys at Memphis, I just got a text from C.B.R. this morning, who they have him as one of the five leading scorers in the history of this tournament, have him fifth. He said, Thanks for letting me rock out.

What changes is how you play because of the players you have. I don't have one style that, Okay, you got to match this or you're not playing much. It's trying to figure it out. That's kind of stayed the same.

Then being honest with kids. I'm not going BS them in recruiting. I'm not going to BS them. I'm going to tell them the truth. Some kids can't take it.

They say keep it real. Not with me. You keep it real with these guys. Keeping it real and being honest, yet you got to care, you got to love on 'em. I think I've done all that the same.

What's changed, how we play this game. Do you remember when it used to be five passes before you shoot, you screen everybody? Do you remember how much pick and roll? I never did any pick and roll with Derrick Rose. The reason was, I wanted him to shoot the ball. I didn't want two people to guard him. So we did stuff different.

Tried to play fast. I've never had great shooting teams. As a matter of fact, had some of the worst free-throw shooting teams to come in this tournament. That was the last thing I looked at.

I wanted to see how do they play, how hard do they play, are they competitive, are they good teammates, do they want to be coached. All of that kind of stuff has stayed the same.

But the game has changed. I mean, more people are analytics. Did you ever play? No, I never played, but... What do you mean? It's all what the numbers say. I'm not that guy either. I listen to the numbers, but I go with my gut. Sometimes it's right; sometimes it's not. But that's how I've done it. It's worked out pretty good.

Does that answer what you're saying?

Q. Yes. We saw Karter here. He obviously didn't travel to Nashville. You said Final Four was the best timeline. Any update there or...

JOHN CALIPARI: He won't play this weekend.

Q. You talked about challenges earlier. Hawaii is the best team in college basketball at allowing the fewest assists per game. You are undefeated when you have 20 or more. How do you counteract that tomorrow?

JOHN CALIPARI: Shoot a lot of layups (smiling). I mean, to be honest, we'll play the game as it unfolds. If they want to run and trap, we'll probably have a lot of assists. If they're playing straight up, we'll probably be telling guys to



get to the rim.

They take away threes by fanning out. Well, then you got to spread 'em out and beat 'em on the bounce, if you can. They may play some zone.

Some of this stuff, I'm making calls. I tell the kids, I just need to see how they're playing stuff so we can move forward.

They don't give you a lot of opportunities for catch and shoot, they don't, because they'll spread their defense.

Q. You've been to this tournament dozens of times. One of the things they talk about is maturity. Especially in today's day and age of college basketball, Hawaii is probably the oldest team in the country. They have 24-year-olds, 25-year-olds, who are married. How do you think that can benefit them?

JOHN CALIPARI: They got children. I mean, they're older. They're mentally more equipped to go through this stuff.

But I've started five freshmen one year, and we got to a Final Four. As a matter of fact, final game. This year we're starting two freshmen. We're going to play the best players. We played some older teams. It's harder. They've been through the wars. There's things that they have experienced that an 18-year-old has not experienced.

Part of it is the NCAA tournament, because this is different. This is one game. You play bad, you lose.

THE MODERATOR: We are out of time. Coach, thank you very much.

JOHN CALIPARI: Thank you.

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