

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - High Point vs Arkansas

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Moda Center

Arkansas Razorbacks Coach John Calipari Meleek Thomas Billy Richmond III

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Arkansas student-athletes. At this time we'll open it up to questions.

Q. Meleek, you've always been really good off the ball moving, especially on pick and roll situations. Is that something you did throughout middle school and high school or since college started?

MELEEK THOMAS: I would really say that's something that I've done since middle school, high school. I played New York Lightning in EYBL Circuit. And I had Elliot Cadeau and Tahaad Pettiford as point guards. I was kind of off the ball early.

So yeah, it's just something I've adapted to since young.

Q. One of the things that High Point was really efficient at yesterday is they kept shooting it no matter if they were going in or not. How do you defend that knowing that they're willing to chuck it up pretty much at any given time?

MELEEK THOMAS: I would really just say do our best job. Like you said, they're comfortable shooting it from anywhere, at anytime, miss or make. That's dangerous right there.

So just being alert, not losing sight of their best shooters. Just communicating. If you communicate, you all on one accord, then you can do a pretty good job at locating the shooters.

BILLY RICHMOND III: Back to what he said, just communicating, try to cut their attempts down, make it one



possession. Just rebound to it.

Q. Meleek, a lot has been made of the seven-man rotation, playing without Nick yesterday. Maybe they'll wear down. Didn't seem that way. What is the comfortability level with what you have in your rotation right now?

MELEEK THOMAS: I would say the comfortability level that we have with our rotation right now is we very comfortable without Nick, without any man down, everybody stepping up. 'Cause you kind of got to adjust to who's not playing.

Yeah, we fighting for our life right now. So it's like regardless who's playing, who's not, we got to pick up the pace regardless.

BILLY RICHMOND III: Confidence, everybody confidence is just on the 10. When one man go down, everybody confidence go up. We don't really got that many people, so...

More mistakes, I guess we be on the court more. We try to limit those mistakes because we know we're going to be out there and fight. Just togetherness, that's all.

Q. Your incredible athleticism was on display yesterday. Do you feel you have that advantage every time you play? How will that play out tomorrow?

BILLY RICHMOND III: I mean, yeah. We one of the fastest team and most athletic team in the country. Just making people play with us, spread the floor with us.

MELEEK THOMAS: Yeah, to add what Bill said, very athletic, play very fast. And as long as we get stops and get out in transition, it's easy to put that on display, and that's kind of hard to guard.

Q. Billy, last year you were kind of the hunters, now you're the hunted. What's been the difference?

BILLY RICHMOND III: Just having that target on our back, we know everybody going to give us their best game. We might as well do it, too. Just give our 100%. I know he's going to do it, and my other teammates, so I got to do it,



too.

Q. Meleek, you ran off the floor with something about three minutes in the second half last night, then came back. What came up?

MELEEK THOMAS: I feel well. I kind of just stepped too hard on the ground, like a misstep. Everything great. As soon as I got off the floor, I just wanted to get back into the game. That's just the competitor in me. Didn't really want to miss any moments out there. I just wanted to be there for my teammates after that.

I'm great, though. Thank you.

Q. Billy, a lot of people don't know your dad has a great wing place in Memphis. What is the best wing that your dad makes in Memphis?

BILLY RICHMOND III: Ooh. Me personally, I go with the Memphis dry heat. I like a little spice level. I go with Memphis dry heat. Or you can't go wrong with honey gold, hot honey gold.

I like my granddad's spot, too. A lot of people don't know he got a spot down there called (indiscernible).

Q. Meleek, a thought on playing a team that is a little bit more foreign to the bracket. A lot of people around the country are getting to know High Point. What is the challenge of preparing for a mid-major team?

MELEEK THOMAS: I would say to not sleep on them. To expect they're going to come at us with everything, give us their best game. Just like we do a lot of scout, a lot of film, I know that they do the same. I know they're preparing. Like you said, we're the hunted. I know they're preparing to knock off some of them big teams. We just got to do our best job on approaching the game like we know we will, just head first.

Q. Meleek, Cal yesterday talked about you guys not paying attention to other games. It's probably hard having a phone next to you. How do you stay focused on High Point with so much going on right now?

MELEEK THOMAS: I would say just not looking past anything, not looking forward to anything. As long as you live in the moment and you stay connected with your teammates, we talk amongst each other, watch film, just prepare for one game at a time.

You really can't look forward to anything after the game that you're going to play when you don't even know how the game you going to play is going to go. Just stay in the

moment.

For me it's just praying a lot. It helps me with everything.

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

MELEEK THOMAS: Thank y'all.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Arkansas head coach John Calipari. Coach, we'll begin with your opening statement.

JOHN CALIPARI: Excited we're still playing, and we're playing a really good team by the way. High Point is really good. I've watched tape. I'm like, Wow.

THE MODERATOR: Start with questions.

Q. High Point's guards, obviously kind of the head of the snake. How important is tomorrow's defense from Acuff and Thomas? How have you seen Meleek grow on that end of the floor this year?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, both of them have really grown. It's funny. Two teams are going to play really fast, their team and our team. They shoot a few more threes than we do. They're really aggressive. They'll attack the glass. They offensive rebound. They get so many 50/50 balls and 50/50 rebounds.

It's not only going to be tough on our guards, we're going to have to get long rebounds. Bigs are going to have to know that you can't just walk under when they're shooting threes. The only one you're going to rebound is the one that goes through.

Q. There's been a lot made about mid-major's frustrations with scheduling. From your perspective, do you sympathize with the frustrations when it comes to scheduling? What is your approach when filling out the schedule? Are you prioritizing those high matchups against net rankings?

JOHN CALIPARI: And friends. I'll schedule if they tell me we really need this game.

How old are you?

Q. (No microphone.)

JOHN CALIPARI: You don't know my time at UMass where we had to play everybody on the road. Two for ones. Did you ever hear of a two for one? We played Oklahoma two for one. Do you want me to tell you the



story?

We go to Oklahoma. You can't go there twice because Billy Tubbs wouldn't return the game. He'd say, I'm not returning. You made him come to you first. I had to go back to Oklahoma twice.

We go to Oklahoma. The game is a pretty good game. They win the game. He walks down, Billy Tubbs, and says, You know what's great about this game?

What?

You got to come back here again next year.

That's what he said to me. Next year we hit a buzzer that went in. I ran down to him and said, Billy, where is my check? They had to pay us to do the second game.

We did anything we could to schedule games. To get home games. I've been there. It's hard. No one wants to play a team that they think are going to be really good, and they're not going to do it on the road. You're just not going to go on the road. That's why I was doing two for ones.

I got to say this about High Point. First of all, for them to have 31 wins and still playing, do you know how good they must be and well-coached? Coach Clayman, the job he's doing.

The second thing, it proves my point that coaches win games; administrations win championships. They commit to it.

Now, the coach has to be a good steward and has to make good decisions. But he can't do any of that if there's not enough support.

Their president, I got to meet this guy sometime. I mean, he goes and builds a five-star restaurant that the students go to once a week. What? I'm going to go to school there. They have an airline where they go and show you how to sit in an airplane and talk to a CEO who you happen to be next to. All the things they do are student-driven, which means their basketball players and their students are confident because someone really cares.

That's why I always come back to, it's the name on the back, that's what you should be worried about. Right now, because High Point has been that way, look at all that's happening for their university. Everybody's talking about them.

So my hat's off. Yes, coaching and doing what he's doing, but that A.D. and president committing so that we could

compete for championships.

I got to tell you, Chancellor Robinson is the same way on our campus. He's student first. He's about students. Our A.D. has committed to us, Hunter Yurachek has done what we need to have done. Then I got to be a good steward and make good decisions with what we've been given. But we've been given. If we weren't given, you don't have to make decisions. You're just holding on and hoping you can win enough to survive.

Administrations win championships. Coaches can win ball games.

Is that okay that I did that? What did you ask me anyway? I'm sorry.

Q. Yesterday you talked about if you guys get 20 assists, you're pretty much guaranteed to win the game. Is there anything else you look for analytically to help you guys have success on the floor?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, we're a lane-touch team. You'd like to shoot a lot of free throws. You want to make more than they shoot. But this team drives as much as we do.

The assists means we're creating for each other. What drives me nuts is when they're all back there, and someone wants to start bouncing it. They're there. Move that ball and let's play.

I usually tell them, and I don't care what you do at the end of it, just move the ball, cut hard and then play.

I think both teams now are low turnovers. That means your guards are making good decisions. Here's what I mean by that. I'm not going to throw you the ball when you're going to turn it over because I put you in a bad place.

I'm not throwing you the ball because I can't shoot it, so here, you take it. Then you're going to lead to turnovers. We have good guards, two and three, even four to one assist-to-turnover ratio. They do, too.

This is going to be two teams that, because of how we both do things, both universities, they're feeling in a certain way people care, we know what it means, all those things. Fast teams that don't turn it over, should be a crazy game. I just hope we make some more baskets than they make.

Q. Back to High Point. The best way for you to get to see all that cool stuff you're talking about would be to schedule a non-conference game there.



JOHN CALIPARI: How about I just go down there, I'll walk around campus. It's like people wanting me to play in Hawaii. Well, I'll take a vacation. Why am I taking my team? Well, you want to go. Then go on vacation with me.

No, all my friends down there, I've not been on the campus, they tell me that campus is ridiculous. Like, what they've done and how they've done it.

Look, anytime someone tells me student first, players first, you know that's going to touch me. That moves me. So, yeah. But no, I'm not going there to play (smiling).

Q. With Darius, I understand the process to get him to change from a high scorer in high school to a true lead guard started right as he committed.

JOHN CALIPARI: How did you know that?

Q. I talked to Coach Chin.

JOHN CALIPARI: Okay.

Q. What's it been like to kind of see his evolution? Does it surprise you how quickly he's not only picked up on that, but he has a really good feel both on and off the ball?

JOHN CALIPARI: Most of the guards that I've coached understand that I've got to teach you on the ball, off the ball, 'cause if you're playing with Shea, you're going to be off the ball. He's going to be on the ball. If you're playing with Jamal, you're going to be off the ball, he's going to be on the ball. Maybe with Devin you could be on the ball, but he's going to do both.

With him, having his hands on the ball, especially late, you try to trap him, may not be able to. If you do, he's going to make a good decision and make it an easy play for us.

It wasn't that. It was all the other stuff. Learning to lead. When you lead, you're doing something for everybody else. You're not just scoring for yourself, you're scoring for us. And if someone has it going, you lead and get them shots.

He's done a fabulous job of that. His body language, wow. You don't even see anything right now. You watch him play and you say his demeanor is like that. Well, that's the best players that I've coached. Meleek Thomas is kind of the same. You don't really see.

Both of them, if I get on 'em, I got you. But they're not going to waver their confidence. I don't care how they're playing. They both have otherworldly confidence in themselves. That's why I say they could run for president.

They're so confident in themselves, they could do fine.

Q. You are playing tomorrow night at 9:45 Eastern. How does y'all's prep change from playing a game around lunch to playing a game tomorrow night?

JOHN CALIPARI: We'll have a shootaround. Every board is the same. Every meeting the night before the game is the same. What we talk about is the same. The only thing that's different is you don't do a shootaround for an early game. We won't do a shootaround here for that game because they only give you 20 minutes. It's not worth traveling and doing it, but we'll do a shootaround. That's it.

I want these games to be so similar, just like I said in the tournament, the SEC tournament, these games are all the same as what we played all year. So I don't want 'em to think they're any different. Let's go play our best. If that's not good enough, we've had a hell of a year. If it is good enough, let's move on. But be at our best. What do we do? Be who we are.

High Point is going to play the way they play. We're going to play the way we play.

Q. One of the things that made High Point successful yesterday was they were shooting threes at will and pulling up at will. How do you defend that knowing they're pretty much ready to pull up from ranges you only see Steph shoot?

JOHN CALIPARI: We have some teams in our league that play that way.

The one thing about the regular season, you are going to face zone, pressing teams, man teams that sag, man teams that deny everything. Offensively teams play a little slower, you're going to be playing teams that get it in quick and fly. You're going to be playing teams that are trying to shoot 50 threes. So we faced it all.

Now it's, All right, what exactly are we going to do? In most cases, you can't stop everything. Where are you making your stand? What is it that they do that you're saying, All right, let's make sure that this isn't it.

They made shots. They came in the other game. I've watched other games. They've done the same thing. Just come down and launch. Got to rebound misses. You got to make 'em pay when they miss.

Q. You talked about all the amazing guards that you've coached. Who is on your Mount Rushmore of guards that you've coached?



JOHN CALIPARI: I'd make a lot of people mad. I've had 13 players that have been All-Stars. I've had two MVPs in the NBA. Which one of those do you pick?

I mean, so I don't ever do it. Darius and Meleek are different than any of the other guys I've coached. I've had faster players. I've had more athletic guards. The skill, more pure point. They're all different.

You just want 'em all to really succeed. You want 'em to be prepared when they step into that realm that they're ready for it, they get an idea.

Q. I believe coming into the tournament you were second in the country in dunks. Great athleticism. Is that something you work on in practice? Is it natural chemistry?

JOHN CALIPARI: We don't throw a bounce pass when you can throw it at the rim. You threw a bounce pass, everybody on the baseline, we're running. You demand a lot, you get a lot. You accept mediocrity, you're going to get it every time.

We throw the ball at the rim. We're not throwing bounce passes. We may throw to a guard out on the court on a bounce pass, backdoor cut. We're playing versus zone. I think we're rated number two versus zone in the country because we can do both. We can shoot a three or throw a lob.

Yes, we work on it. There's some different actions we do versus man when we're driving to put people in those positions. We're not the only one. I've watched them. They throw lobs. They have their big guys.

Q. After yesterday's game, you said, I'll be walking the streets of Portland tonight enjoying this, and I've got three tapes I got to watch of High Point. Did you make good on that, actually went out and enjoyed the city a little bit? What does Coach Cal do to unwind after a game like that?

JOHN CALIPARI: I did watch a couple tapes last night. Watched one this morning. Did the stuff that I normally do in the day. Did walk the city a little bit.

But right now I'm pretty locked into this group. We had a staff meeting, met with the players briefly. Trying to leave them alone. Sometimes they look at me like I'm the principal, so I got to get away from 'em so they can let their hair down and be who they are.

I was just on the phone with Tom Izzo and Mark Few, the three of us. Both Darius and Trevon heard me laughing.

They said, We've never heard you laugh that way.

Yeah, I don't always talk to these guys. I'm always around you guys. What am I going to laugh about? We don't have anything in common.

I've enjoyed Portland. I always have. I mean, Terrence Jones, when we went and recruited him. I just saw his picture on the wall playing against Portland for Houston. I just saw it out there. I was laughing. I said, There's Terrence right there.

No, it's a neat city. We had some dinners out. It's been good.

Q. Any update on Nick Pringle's health? High Point shoots a lot of free throws. Anything you're telling guys before the game about foul trouble?

JOHN CALIPARI: First of all, I don't know about Nick. Second of all, what I basically say is don't foul. We don't have enough guys. Don't foul.

A layup or a basket is not a touchdown. We'll score in eight seconds. So don't foul. If you know you made a mistake, let 'em go, give 'em the basket.

I don't know if that makes sense, but... When you're playing five and six guys...

Q. Are there inherent dangers in playing a 12th seed that's probably feeling good about themselves and ready to keep rolling?

JOHN CALIPARI: Probably should be a 5 seed. When you watched them play, they were probably better than that. What happens is you don't screw them by giving them that seed. You screw the team they're playing. That's who you screw.

I've been there where they had us as an 8. I said, You just screwed the 1. We ended up beating the 1 who was 34-0. We ended up beating them. The guy was mad. I said, We shouldn't have been an 8. So I've been in those situations.

Look, this is about trying to live another day. So it don't matter who you're playing, whether the game is close, whether you have a lead. It's about just survive another day and let's see what we can do.

Q. You talk about the team that went to the national championship. Does this team this year remind you of any team whether in Lexington, UMass... Do you see any similarities from the composition of this squad?



JOHN CALIPARI: Maybe a little bit like my Memphis team with Derrick Rose, Chris Douglas, Antonio Anderson, Robert Dozier, Joey Dorsey. We had Shawne, a couple other guys. That team. Kind of long, played through your guards. Had some skill.

I would say a little bit like that team. That team was fast, too, now. But again, I've done this a few years. I hate to mention guys and then not mention other guys.

But no, every team is unique. Someone asked me today about how is it now coaching a new team every year. What are you talking about? I've done it for 20 years. Every team, I had everybody leave. You figure out what they need, not you got to play this way. I'm analytically telling you.

I've had guys that need to be mid level games. They're not great three-point shooters. You can't always go to the rim. Pull up. I'm fine with that. You play different. You still play fast. How fast? As fast as you can play without turning it over all the time. How many threes do you shoot? Well, it depends. Can you make 'em? It ain't just shooting them. I need makers, not shooters. How do you defend? Depends on who we have.

That team would be the one I would say off the top of my head. But I've had a lot of really good teams because I've had a lot of really good players. Those players all came together, and they all sacrificed for their teammates. They could have done more, shot more, done more.

I think somebody just told me I had 12 players that scored 50 points in an NBA game. That means I held them all back. Bam just had 83. What? That means you have really good guys that come together, play for each other, accept each other for what they are, and do it for each other.

I've been blessed, folks. Parents have entrusted me with their children. I've been blessed.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your time.

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