

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

Arkansas Razorbacks

John Calipari

Darius Acuff Jr.

Meleek Thomas

Media Conference

Arkansas - 94, High Point - 88

JOHN CALIPARI: Their coach coached right to the end. Coach Clayman did a great job. We hung around and then just so you know, we play it through Darius and he just makes plays. He's done it all season.

And then Meleek Thomas makes that three, which busted the game. They both have confidence, no matter what I say to them, I get on 'em they're like, man, you're nuts. They have confidence in who they are and what they are. Sometimes I'm trying to get 'em to play a little different, but the reality of it is these two, they're special, both of 'em.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Darius, a lot of clutch shots in this building hit by a point guard. That you may be familiar with. I'm wondering the confidence in that moment, where does that come from, and is somebody like that somebody you look up to?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Yeah, on the first part it's just how I was raised. Always wanted to be the big moment. Always just thinking win. Like whatever I got to do to win that's what I'm going to do.

Yeah I'm very familiar with Dame. I watch him a lot for sure. But in them last couple minutes I'm just thinking about the team, just getting the win.

Q. Is there something that High Point was doing throughout the course of the game when you made adjustments and they seemed to kind of just stay in it



no matter what?

JOHN CALIPARI: The hard thing they do, they play a funky zone. And you got to not think zone. You got to think, we got to do some different things. You have to get motion and movement and cutters or you're not going to score on it. So when you have a one-day turn, it's hard.

But I thought the kids did great. We're a good zone offensive team. We've been that all year. But they got to make plays. I mean, you know, we made some plays. Now they made 'em the whole game now.

The other guy that really helped us was Malique Ewin down the stretch. I mean, he was big down the stretch and getting balls and defending, but it was a good win that way.

But, yeah, we made adjustments, they made adjustments, we were going back and forth. We're calling timeouts, he's calling timeouts. Just trying to fight to survive.

Q. You talk about these two being freshmen and just playing with that confidence, but they're still freshmen, and maybe they're not playing like typical freshmen, but just speak on their maturity of their game, just being two true freshmen and just having that confidence in both of them down the stretch.

JOHN CALIPARI: I want you to look at these two closely, okay. They have otherworldly confidence, both of 'em. They could run for president and believe I could run this country, because that's how they think. I like that they're starting to talk in huddles about let's do this, let's do that. They're being empowered. I'm trying to get Meleek Thomas to catch and shoot it. Quit bouncing it and side stepping, just shoot. So the last one he just caught and shot. He's one of the best scorers in the country. He scores different ways, just like him.

And you know what's great, they're playing off of one another. And all they have done is helped each other. People are like, how are you going to get these two to play together? They're both good young people with good hearts and they care about each other. So now if he has it going, he's the one passing it to him. Keep shooting. If I get on him, he's telling him, just keep playing. If I get on him, he's telling him, just keep playing. Sometimes they're



... when all is said, we're done.®



saying, don't even listen to him.

So it's been -- all I've had to do is the edges were a little rough, just had to get the edges around. And they're defending. I hear all this stuff about defense, they're both defending. They both get their hands on balls. They both can rebound. We had seven turnovers against a team that creates 16. We had seven turnovers. That's because these two are handling the ball. But I think Meleek had two of 'em, yeah, he had two.

Q. You mentioned the rebounds. You guys were down in rebounding, you took the lead in the second half and also with the free throws you missed some and then you only missed one in the second half. Was there any conversation about that at halftime to kind of correct those things?

JOHN CALIPARI: These guys have a will to win and we were in there talking I said, we are up one. Let's come out these first five minutes and do some stuff.

Now I know I had to call a timeout, I think we were down four just to calm everybody down. But they know what they have to do. They know.

We're shorthanded, so what? No one wants to hear that. I didn't see one story about it. I mean, and then when TB went down I'm like, okay, now I got five. How many do you really need? Five. Just your warmup line is with one ball, you can't have two balls. There's not enough guys.

But you know what, they have a will, they're like, whoever it is, let's go.

Q. You talk about defense and I think Billy had a block and a steal in the final two minutes?

JOHN CALIPARI: Who?

Q. Billy. How pivotal is he late in games, especially on the opponent's best player?

JOHN CALIPARI: Is he never fazed by anything, is he? Nothing fazes him. Like he does something dumb, he'll look at me and just say, that's me, I got it. But he's another one that's a -- we call him Billy Goat because he just does stuff that normal players don't do. How hard he plays, the plays he comes, like how did he make that play?

So, no, he's a big part. Shooting the ball, he missed some free throws. He's been one of our best free-throw shooters. But you know what, we still made 75 percent of our free throws and 56 percent of our threes, and 52 percent of our twos. We shot the ball pretty well. And it

took all of that to beat High Point. Who has 31 wins. 31 wins.

Q. It's 83-83, Darius makes a layup, they miss, Darius makes a finger roll, they miss, Billy gets a steal and Darius hits a three. Can you talk about that sequence, how valuable that was?

JOHN CALIPARI: That's happened a few times. And then the three that my man made that puts us up, which gave us some breathing room. But he's done it. Like I'll even ask, do you want a screen or do you want an open court? Tell me what you want. He'll tell me and then he goes and -- the only thing I told him was, you can't get bumped and go away from it, because they're not calling those fouls. You got to go right through the bump and keep going and that's what he did. So they were fouling, he went to the line, he made 'em or he made layups.

Q. You recruited Cam'Ron Fletcher to Kentucky six years ago and tonight he scores 25 points, gets eight rebounds. Just talk about what you've seen and how he changed all these years later and just?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, you know, he came up to me at an AAU event and Coach, when I had him he was really young, a little bit immature and said I want to apologize. I said stop. You were young and you acted young. I'm fine. This is what I do for a living. So today to see him do what he did, I was proud of him. Just wanted to beat him, but I was proud of him. He put his shoulder down and just did what he wanted to do. And he made a bunch of threes.

So no, I'm happy that it's turned out this way for him for High Point. And I say the same thing, if you want players to be empowered, they got to know that there's a commitment to the players. We have that at Arkansas and you have that at High Point. They are committed, which is why you have a chance to win championships. If they're not committed -- and now we gotta be good stewards of what they give to us and we got to make good choices, but if we don't have, we don't need to be a steward because we don't have enough to be the steward with, or you're not going to have enough guys to do something.

And I said, and I bragged on High Point because they have a president that is about those students. Everything they do is about those students. You know what, they're empowered. Their students flew 'em out in a plane. How many came on a private plane? Chartered? I'm going to ask him, can he charter me somewhere?

But, again, I love to see it, and it proves my point, administrations win championships. Coaches win games. In this era of NIL and all the other stuff, I'm telling you, if



you're not totally into it, and they're not committed, you're not winning now. You just can't. And High Point is.

And I'll tell you, everybody down there wants to go to High Point. I had a guy that listened to me talk and said, my son's trying to get in. He probably won't be able to get in now. It is a great school, a great campus, and I'm just happy we were able to sneak out a W for these kids so we can keep playing.

Q. Coach Cal talked about how well you all play off of each other, how has that chemistry developed over the year?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: It's something we talked about coming in. It's our first year. We talked about it in high school when we first committed and like I said, it don't just take a game, it takes practice, workouts, just it takes a lot of communication, I would say, and we have that. So when you're so close with another player or the whole team, you just have that connection, I would say.

MELEEK THOMAS: It takes a lot of communication, a lot of togetherness like Darius said. We spoke about that before the season and when you're genuinely happy for your teammate you're genuinely happy for your brother, then you really get excited and you get enjoyment out of seeing him dominate and do well. So like when he's on, it's like, yeah, keep doing you. That's how I be feeling when I'm out there.

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