

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Arkansas vs Arizona

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SAP Center

Arkansas Razorbacks Coach John Calipari Trevon Brazile Billy Richmond III

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

JOHN CALIPARI: Happy to be here. Happy for my team. I'm having a ball coaching them. You just want to keep it going.

Q. John, a lot has been made about the size that Arizona has. Concerning Koa Peat, what's the key for your defense limiting him, and how many different guys, defenses might you throw at him?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, I recruited him pretty hard and got to know he and his family. Unbelievable young person, winner mentality. Very physical. It's going to be hard for us. We can throw four guys at him. He can throw them all to the floor.

I think he won three state titles. He's good. He's a terrific player.

Q. Cal, I was reading some other press conference notes the other day, and Kelvin Sampson was saying coaching four freshmen is going to put me in an early grave, I can't do this anymore, it's so hard --

JOHN CALIPARI: He's happy with his freshmen.

Q. You've coached a lot, a lot, a lot of super-talented freshmen. But have you also sometimes thought, this is taking years off my life?

JOHN CALIPARI: This profession does that to you. But the reward in it is what Kelvin is seeing, what I see in this team, and the joy I get from what I do is when someone



says I knew Darius Acuff was good, but I never realized he was that good. I knew Meleek Thomas was good, but I never knew he was this good.

I knew Trevon Brazile had this in him, but I had not seen it in a while. Billy Goat, two different cities said we watched him and he was good, but he was never this good. Seeing D.J., having people call me and say he's impacting winning for your team as much as anyone on it, having all that -- seeing Malique Ewin doing stuff he's never done, effort, energy, scoring double-doubles in real games, nothing makes me happier.

But winning is the next phase of that. If you get them all right, they will want to win to keep playing. That's why I always say it's about the name on the back, not the name on the front. You can say all that stuff, but at the end of the day, it's are you getting your guys -- and Kelvin, who's a dear friend, what he's done with those freshmen, I mean, I recruited both of them. They're good. And they're even better than I thought they were.

Q. Coach, on the Pat McAfee show you briefly mentioned potentially playing Sealy a few minutes. Can you talk about what he brings to the team and what injecting fresh legs this deep into a run --

JOHN CALIPARI: We've got to try to play more than five guys, and Sealy -- I'll make a statement. Within the next year or two, you're going to say, where did this kid come from? Bouncy, his reactions to stuff, his natural instincts. He just needs more time. He needs to be coached. He needs to be more focused. He needs to create better habits.

But that's all young kids. But I've loved coaching him.

The times he's had to play, my coaching friends have said, I love that kid. But this will be a hard one. But I'm not going to be afraid to put him in, and I told him -- I woke up one morning, and it was like, play Isaiah, and when I have those gut feelings, that's stuff that I do. The plan is to play him and go from there.

This is one of those games, folks, where we do some things a little better than them, they do some things a little better than us. Tommy has done a great job with his team.



They play to their strengths just like we do.

They shoot about the same amount of free throws per game as we do. They do it different. They pound it big, we slash. But it's the same. They make one free throw, 1.2 or 1.3 more than we make per game.

So my thought is if they let it go when we're both beating each other, I'm fine with that. If you want to call a lot of fouls, they're going to be called both ways because we play the same way. So my guess is at the end there will be the same amount of fouls, near the same amount of free throws on both teams because they do it one way, they do it another, but the final result has been the same. That's what makes this an interesting game.

Can we do better at what we do as they do better at what they -- it's kind of like the same thing. It's their will against our will, and who's going to hold out the longest, and that's why I need a couple more guys playing.

Q. Just curious what the biggest growth you've seen out of Darius Acuff from the first time you saw him in this program until now?

JOHN CALIPARI: Maturity, leadership skills, body language, whoo, went from -- it screams now. Your body language screams. His really screamed. You look at him now, he's like all the best players that I've coached. He's like that. You never really see him.

The only time he gets mad is when I really get on him. I had a meeting in my office and I said, I'm telling you, my entire career I'm hardest on my best players because if I can coach them hard, I can coach everyone on my team hard. He said, I got it, I'm good. He wasn't great, but he said he was good. And I've been hard on him.

There were times that I'm pointing him out in front of this team in areas that he's got to get better and improve. But it's -- he has improved -- what I did not know was his will to win. You've got to coach a guy. The skill stuff, I knew he could score. People, well, you can't play Meleek Thomas and him; they'll never play together. Come on, man, I've done this 30 years. Maybe a little bit longer.

But I've had two players like them, John Wall, Eric Bledsoe, if you want me to keep going I'll start naming names, that had to play together. You know what, Eric Bledsoe and John Wall are as close as any two players that I've coached. These two are the same. And they've got to hear stuff, oh, you should shoot more, he should shoot more. They don't listen to it. They lock in and they care about one another. They know if -- they cheer for each other. If one of them gets it going, the other is happy as

heck.

Q. You've obviously relied on freshmen for a long time. Is it different in today's game when you have some teams using 23, 24 older guys --

JOHN CALIPARI: 25, 26, 27, beards, kids in the stands, on their second wife. Yeah, this is a little bit different.

Then you say, well, why are they staying in school so long? For the money. I don't blame them. I do not blame them. It's our fault that we have nothing that prohibits age. Make it 25. Kids transfer five times, why? It's the same reason. Can I get more money somewhere. That's why if you put your name in the portal when you're on my team, you're out. I'm not going to be extorted. You know where we stand on things.

It's, yes, harder with freshmen. Now, we just brought in three five-star freshmen, all physically able to guard 24- and 25-year-olds. If you're not physically able to withstand a 25 or 26, it's really dangerous. But the three that we just signed, they're all -- I can call them beasts.

So the ones that we have on this team, Isaiah wasn't physically up to that stuff, which is why he's not playing as much. But I'm telling you, he is a good player, too.

Q. Cal, you brought up Meleek and Darius. I wonder your thoughts on Bradley and Burries, older guy, younger guy, that you're competing against tomorrow.

JOHN CALIPARI: He's really good. He scores three levels, active defensively, better defensively than I thought a freshman would be. Hats off to Tom on that, too.

Tommy gets that kid who can do what he does offensively to guard, it's saying something.

But he's good. Wow. He's really good.

Q. So much is made of the kind of freshman duo of Koa Peat and Brayden Burries. Can you talk to us about Ivan Kharchenkov and what he brings to Arizona and what you've seen in the scout so far?

JOHN CALIPARI: He's -- look, I don't want to keep saying this because you're going to think I'm crazy, but all the tape I watch, oh, my gosh, Diorio [phonetic] -- what's that kid's name? I mean, I'm looking at him saying, who the heck is this guy? Then you bring the kid that I had to face at Tennessee, like what?

But that kid has a sneaky athletic quickness to him to be able to get to the rim, great hands, so he can steal balls, so

you've got to -- if he's like in that cat stance, you'd better be careful because he's going to try to run through and steal. But he's good. Geez.

Look, how many have they won? There's a reason they've got 34 wins. Guys like him, the freshmen they have, the veterans, the big kids that they have, the big kid inside -- I mean, if you're not ready for hand-to-hand combat, he's throwing you aside.

Q. Last week you mentioned that Darius and Meleek -- sometimes you just get on them and they think you're crazy. Do you see them actually listening to what you're saying and taking it in and growing from that, or do you think they just kind of ignore --

JOHN CALIPARI: Darius has to act like he's not listening, so he has to. That's who he is. I'll say, Darius, you heard what I said? He'll verbatim, da-da-da-da. Meleek listens but he answers every question wrong. I don't know why, but it's like the running joke on the team. Whatever he says is wrong.

But they both -- I call them otherworldly confidence. You only gain that by being a gym rat. You only gain that by demonstrated performance, which is go in the game and perform, and then you live in the gym. And everything you do is about basketball. The other stuff doesn't matter. All the other outside stuff does not move you. That's those two. That's why I say, to be President of the United States, you have to have otherworldly ego, confidence, otherworldly. Like, beyond.

Well, that's why I said, those two could run for president. Knowing them both could lead and do a heck of a job.

Q. (No microphone)?

JOHN CALIPARI: They said what? Yeah, if they get elected, I just want one night in the Lincoln bedroom and I'll be happy.

Q. This question is for either one of you. There was a moment during High Point when it was clutch time, Darius has the ball up top and he kind of just takes a moment, breathes and then just drives to the basket. It felt like at that moment like the whole world kind of stopped and paused for a second. When you see him just up top guarded one-on-one, what's going your head knowing all he's capable of?

TREVON BRAZILE: We've been seeing it all season. We know he's going to go get a bucket. We don't think nobody can guard him, especially on one-on-one. That's just him with his confidence and our confidence in him to go make a

play.

BILLY RICHMOND III: Like he said, we know who he is, that killer mentality that he's got. We just knew he was going to score that play. Just call it flat.

Q. Billy, I know you guys have a lot of alums that come back and practice, Cal has got former players, you guys got to practice in Sacramento's practice facility. What is that like playing for a coach who has so many NBA connections and players for you guys?

BILLY RICHMOND III: It's great, getting to have that experience that they had in college, it's all a brotherhood so we try to engrain the same thing in us, just come together and be together on and off the court.

Q. I just want to know, what's the mindset for you guys just going into tomorrow?

TREVON BRAZILE: You know, we know it's going to be a dogfight, so we're just going in mentally preparing ourselves for that, physically, also. We know it's going to be a fast-paced game so we're just getting ready to go play our game and we'll see what happens tomorrow.

BILLY RICHMOND III: He said it all.

Q. Billy, last game you had your first double-double. Can you talk about just finding your role throughout the course of the season, finally starting the last 14 games and adopting the Billy Goat nickname?

BILLY RICHMOND III: I mean, my role is just do the little things for my teammates. I know I ain't the best in scoring, facilitating, but I play my part from here and there and just starting to open a whole new level up for my game and just giving my teammates (indiscernible) is what I try to do. It's just a cool name. Coach Cal game up with it, so obviously like "Ba-ha-ha," little billy goat.

Q. Who's the better dunker, you or Billy?

TREVON BRAZILE: I would say Billy Richmond probably, and also that last question, I think he's a really good scorer and a really good facilitator. I think he can do both very well. So you should have said that. That's what you should have said. He can do a little bit of everything.

I'd say Billy Richmond.

Q. What have been some of the benefits of staying out west from the Portland pod and getting down here and I guess being together ultimately throughout the road trip and getting down here for the Sweet 16?

BILLY RICHMOND III: I mean, it just brought us closer. And the weather. We don't really get too much good weather in Fayetteville, but it's really hot out here, really nice. Just spending time with each other. We can't take that for granted. It just helps us with the chemistry.

Q. You guys probably will be two of the primary defenders on Koa Peat tomorrow. From your perspective what do you see from him? What do you need to do to limit him tomorrow?

TREVON BRAZILE: Really good player. We knew that going in. So we're going to go out there and play him like he's a really good player. He can do a little bit of everything. We've been preparing for him, and we'll be preparing for him tomorrow.

BILLY RICHMOND III: Like he says, we've just got to be as physical as him. He's a big boy, so we've just got to match his energy the whole time, and he's got to match our energy.

Q. You guys were both on that Sweet 16 team last year, up late against Texas Tech. Do you go back and remember just how painful that was to maybe push you guys in tomorrow's matchup against Arizona?

BILLY RICHMOND III: Yeah, but it brings a little fuel to the fire. But they're not our opponent, so we just take one game at a time. We worry about Arizona right now. Don't want to be in the same position we were in last year. We've got the pieces this year for the team, so try and go all the way.

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