

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 11, 2021

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

**Kentucky Wildcats**

**John Calipari**

Postgame Press Conference



Mississippi State 74, Kentucky 73

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by coach. Would you like to start with an opening statement.

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, just finishing it off at the end, I thought we were going to make a run. The way we started the game was so disappointing. Basically we got punked. I mean, they're plus-15 rebounds. Are you kidding me? I've never seen that. Division I against Division III maybe, but I've never seen 15. Are you going to be down 30 rebounds? They're going to out-rebound you 15 to 20? I never heard of such a thing.

I told them at halftime, this will be a great story, this comeback, if that's what you want. I can't play anybody that's not going to rough it up. If you don't want body contact, you can't be in this game.

Then I was trying anything I could. Dontaie had it going. The kids loved it, I loved it. We were running stuff for him. He was making shots.

You notice from the Arkansas game, I kind of adjusted the out-of-bounds stuff. We did what we wanted and got a good look. If he wasn't so wide open, I would have called a timeout right in front of us. He was so wide open, I just let it go.

But it's just disappointing. Let me just say, kind of like the year went. A couple baskets here, a block here, they make a free throw, we miss a free throw, a guy is wide open, instead of making a tough play and getting fouled, we take a jump shot that doesn't have a chance of going.

Our teams physically have always been roughhouse tough. This team wasn't that way. But let's look at it. All they've been through, you're down 14 at half, could have been down 20, you come back and go up 5 or 6. The only basketball thing I showed them, they ran the same play twice. Dontaie got screened and didn't say anything.

Instead of, Take mine, take mine, he didn't say anything.

When they ran it the second time and he didn't say anything, it didn't matter, go out and guard them. We gave them one. That was the two. I'm like, C'mon now, we're better than that. That's having basketball sense.

Give Mississippi State credit. They were ready to go. Their bigs haven't done that to any team this year what they did to us. They scored almost every point in the first half.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

**Q. I'm sure over the course of this year you've spent a lot of time thinking, How did we get here, how did this happen. What are the biggest things you feel like you've learned?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Not right now. Let's just talk Mississippi State. That's all I'm going to talk about because to really sit back and look at some things that went, guys that we thought, the corona.

One of the things I'm proud of, we went five months with no positive tests on the staff or the team. Five months. That means the kids were disciplined. That means the university was doing what they were supposed to do to keep these kids safe, how we traveled, what they did. No expense was spared to make sure we did it the right way.

But, again, this is having a brand-new team without Keion, without Terrence, trying to do this, then playing one of the best schedules in the country. Doesn't bode well for what was going on.

You know what's sad? We were a couple wins away from being a team, even with a bad record, two or three wins, and you're right there with all the numbers that they're saying all these teams in the NCAA tournament.

You know what, at the end of the day you got to win games and you got to be tough and you got to play winning basketball, not just basketball. I'm either going to get fouled or it's a shot I can make or a shot someone

rebounds. Defensively I'm not breaking down and fouling and giving them a chance to beat us on the foul line. Ain't happening. That's not winning basketball.

We were never able to get fully engaged in that. But I'll say this, all these kids have been through, and they never stopped, they gave us an effort every night in practice, every game. We were lacking and flawed in different ways as a team, but they fought.

I would say disappointed in the record but not disappointed in these kids. Not disappointed in them. We weren't what we thought we could be at some different spots. We'll address that when the season's over, or when this winds down, I should say.

**Q. Obviously there were lots of things out of your control this year in terms of COVID. Do you think that had a bigger part in how this played out or are there things about the program that need to be adjusted?**

JOHN CALIPARI: We'll look at it later. This is more about this game.

**Q. It looked like Dontaie was playing with more confidence and movement than what he had in recent weeks. Was that just because he made a shot or two early, or is that what you've been seeing was coming for him?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, we saw it in practice. I mean, the only two people in our practice, Goose and Tom, and they watch. If a kid goes 1-12, they're sitting there watching. No one else is in there. All of a sudden he starts making shots again, and you see it. I went on the radio show and said he was on fire for the first time in a month and a half.

It was kind of like we played Transy, and he went on fire, and you got to see it. The person that got to see it more than anybody else was Dontaie. The greatest thing for him, these players cheered him on. They wanted him to shoot. They were begging him to shoot. What a great thing for a team like this.

I'll be honest with you, they were good with Terrence. They knew some of their minutes were going to go down if he played Terrence. They were fine with it. They were cheering him on.

**Q. How did you think Terrence Clarke performed for you, given not being out there for so long? Brandon struggled, it seemed. How difficult was it as a coach to not know what you were going to get from players game to game?**

JOHN CALIPARI: That was a tough one for this year. Again, let's just talk no summer, no fall, 10 new players who had never played together, no Keion. You're six games in, eight games in, whatever it is, no Terrence Clarke.

What I tell you about Terrence, he was fine until he got a little winded, then there was a play, the ball bounced near him, he had no chance of getting it because he couldn't even move to go get it. That's when I took him back out. It's not fair to put him in and then have him make a play that we lose. It was all coming back to effort and intensity at the end anyway.

I thought he did fine. It's a heck of a thing that he wanted to try to play to help our team. He knew if we had four games in four days, he was going to be needed.

**Q. You talked about how Mississippi State inside, the way they dominated around the rim. Was that just a toughness issue or was Mississippi State doing things to get the ball inside easily?**

JOHN CALIPARI: We had worked for a few days about sitting on the post, basically fronting the post. In the first half, we just stood behind the post. We don't weigh enough, we're not tough enough. They would turn shoulders into you, elbows into you, move you, and just lay the ball in.

He weighs 260, our guy weighs 195. We said you got to sit on 'em. You got to get around. What happened in the second half was we started switching ball screens. When you watch what was happening, they were going ball screen, we just switched everything, had our big guard their guards and our guards guard their big until we could switch back. That's where we made a run on them.

In the first half, they were driving it down and throwing it to the post. Our guards got beat on the dribble. Then they were dropping balls to the post. We were standing behind.

The other thing is they rebounded. When you talk about how they scored, they probably scored seven, eight baskets by just offensive rebounding, where we just couldn't come up with balls.

**Q. It seemed like the first half you obviously got out-rebounded, outplayed in the paint. There was no sense of urgency on the team. I'd like to know what you said at halftime to turn this around. What did you say after the game was over and the disappointing loss?**

JOHN CALIPARI: At halftime, the staff was going crazy a

little bit. I walked in and said, Just stop, this ain't about us. This is if they want to do this, we'll fight. We're going at you in the post. You're going to either prove you're tough enough or you're not.

We talked about, Do you understand if we get this close, you're going to watch a different game? I talked about, All right, I'm starting Dontaie this half. Jacob, just too physical a game for you. Can't play in this game.

Now we went with him, and the team was kind of jacked that we did it. But the reality of it is we fought. We threw it into the post. We weren't trying to shoot jumpers. We're coming at you just like you're coming at us. Then a couple things.

After the game I said, Look, I'm just going to go two things. One, the two plays that they ran in a row for the three that we did not speak, not one word. Then when they did it a second time, you didn't have to speak. You knew what was coming. You still let them get the shot off?

I said, Now, the way you fought, the way you came back, man, I'll tell you what, I can't begin to tell you how it made me feel to watch you do that. But again, what you're going to learn in this sport, if you physically can't do it, then you're not going to be able to do it. You can skills, bounce it, do your thing. If you physically can't do it, you can't do it. This was a great lesson.

Sometimes you can physically do it, I'd rather not because it's kind of rough, guy hits my body, I'm going to push instead of wedge. He drives, I'm going to back away from him. If I have to offensive rebound, he may touch me, so I'm going to stay out here.

Okay, but here is the point: Either you play that way or not this sport. This sport is a man's sport. The way they played in the first half, we gave ourselves a chance...

Then the only other thing I talked about is academics. It's time to finish the term. It's not an option here. You finish the term. You get with Mike Stone, you line whatever up you got to line up, but you finish the term.

**Q. You were talking about the comeback. How encouraging is it for you with this roster to see, even though you're down by double-digits, they come back and make it a game?**

JOHN CALIPARI: No, no, I'm sorry. I coach at Kentucky. No, no.

I'm happy for them that they fought to get back in it. We had a chance to win. If you noticed, me or the staff, none

of us stopped. We didn't stop coaching. We're doing everything we can to give them a chance to win.

Here is the problem: We're not on the court. They've got to finish things off. You have to make winning basketball plays. I'm not shooting a shot that cannot be rebounded. I'm not. I'm either getting fouled or I'm making a basket. Or I shoot it and we rebound it. I'm not taking something that we can't.

On defense, they're not beating us at the foul line. We've had it happen how many times now? They're going to have to make a basket, not free throws. And we foul. That's not winning basketball.

But, no, I'm the coach at Kentucky. One, being in the game, being down at half, no, I'm not happy. How they fought? I'm happy for them to get them to understand. It's a great lesson for them. This season was a lesson for them. Hopefully, if they self-evaluate, they know where they are as an individual player. They also know this is a team game. If you don't play together, you can't win.

Again, I feel bad for them. They did not get to experience Kentucky. Now, you and I know if we got up five in a normal season, how many people would have been in this building? 17,000 out of 19 would have been Kentucky people. Then you finish off the game.

What would have happened for Dontaie? Just the same thing that happened for Davion the other night where he made all those shots. This place would have been going. They didn't get to experience it. They only experienced the other side. You lose here, you struggle at home. C'mon, man, we lost four or five home games or more? We don't lose at home. We haven't lost that in my entire time here.

This experience for them, they've been cheated. But you know what, I'll say this, they could have taken better advantage of the opportunity that was here playing-wise. I wish I could have helped them more. I wish I could have done more. I wish I could have thought of different things.

I will say I walk away knowing the staff and I, we worked and never stopped for these kids. And it was about them. We never took it personal. Not looking at it like my record. I don't care about that. I don't care what my record is forever. I don't care. This is about how do we help kids, how do we get them prepared for life, for basketball, for life after basketball. How do we get them prepared as a man, as a father, as a husband. How do we do this, what do we do together to do this.

I think these kids were cheated in one way and not cheated in another way. Going through this is one of the great life

lessons they had, and they survived it. They had the chance. When you let stuff go, you learn to fight more. Somebody's going to die, them or us. Well, you must be okay if it's you because you're going to take a shot or you're going to foul. You must have been okay that it was you to die.

My teams historically played like if they lost, they were going to the electric chair. This team did not. Times we did. But maybe physically we weren't capable of that. But you know what, here is what I would say. For them to play how they started that game, then to play the second half the way they played, says something about them. They never quit on anything. They didn't quit one time this year.

Thanks.

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