

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 10, 2023

Kentucky Wildcats

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach John Calipari

Oscar Tshiebwe

Antonio Reeves

Postgame Press Conference



Vanderbilt 80, Kentucky 73

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with Kentucky. We'll ask Coach Calipari for some opening remarks, then take questions.

Coach Calipari.

JOHN CALIPARI: Vandy deserved to beat us. They made their free throws. We missed ours. They made unbelievable plays down the stretch of shot clock and we didn't. We out-rebounded them, did some good stuff. Got to three daggers this time of the year. You got to take care of what's in front of you, and we didn't tonight.

But in the other sense, we probably need to get healthy. Having some time off may play in our hands, even though I'm not happy with the outcome of the game. But we got to get everybody healthy and go on this next run.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Oscar, you've been talking national championship since you decided to come back to Kentucky. What is your message going to be to your teammates over the next three, four days?

OSCAR TSHIEBWE: We just got to stay focused. We got to trust in each other, trust our team. We got a pretty good team. We struggled a little bit today with free throws, missed couple.

Vandy was good. I have faith in my teammates in everything. This will give us more chance to be well and be prepared.

Q. Antonio, Oscar probably knows something about this, but how frustrating is it fouling out of the game and not being able to contribute in the final minutes?

ANTONIO REEVES: It's very frustrating. I wanted to be out there for the team. I wanted to make a big play. Got a holding foul. Took us out of rhythm a little bit. Just got to cheer on from the bench.

Q. Antonio, you wanted to be playing tomorrow, but can you take solace now that you have an extra two days of rest?

ANTONIO REEVES: Yeah, just rest. Got a couple guys out, couple injuries. But it's all in the making. We definitely going to fight in the NCAA tournament. I got faith in my team, line Oscar said. Being able just to go back to the drawing board.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and continue with Coach Calipari.

Q. Where do you think the breakdowns were that allowed Vandy to get to the rim so often?

JOHN CALIPARI: Again, they were ducking us. We had worked hard on getting around so you could body. But later in the game we did some good stuff where they had tough shots.

Early in the game, it was shooting layups. We talked about it at halftime. They were a little quicker. We were trying to give space. But we didn't want to give angles, and we gave angles up.

But they made tough shots too now. They made some of the layups that were really hard shots. You've got to give them credit.

Q. With Sahvir, do you have any hope he will play in the tournament? How difficult would it be to put him in that spot after not playing for a month?

JOHN CALIPARI: It hurt us today with Cason. Cason not playing, that's what happens when you're trying to plug

guys in at this time of the year.

But he went through some practice stuff the other day. So I think he's getting closer. Hopefully he's going to be able to give us some minutes.

Again, you're not going to play 30 minutes, but he can give us minutes, just like CJ gave us minutes down in Arkansas.

I tried to sub the group. The game didn't stop for nine minutes. I mean, I'm like... I was going to call a timeout. I said, What in the world? It didn't stop, so...

Whether it be Cason or Oscar. But again, it was a roughhouse game. A lot of grabbing. It's the way the game was played.

We had some guys not make plays. I don't want to say they were tired, but those are plays we're capable of making. We got it to three. I mean, we had a wide-open three to get it to one. They made the three at the shot clock, two at the shot clock. They played for their lives. They're an NCAA tournament team now. I think they were before this game, yes.

Q. You often say the end of the first half, start of the second half, 14-0 run, gave them confidence going out and coming in?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah. It was again disappointing what those plays were, then what we missed. I kept saying we had to get close. We're going to win this, just make a play. Someone's got to make a play. If you're open, drop it. Someone's going to have to go get a block out of nowhere. We just didn't have it and they did.

Q. Have you ever had a team where, as you're watching, you're like these guys have it figured out, then there's a step back, they're done for the year, you win the next time?

JOHN CALIPARI: They play better when they have nothing to lose 'cause. I call it stinking thinking. You can't worry about how you're playing, missing a shot, you just lock into the team, do what the team needs you to do.

When we play that way, we're as good as anybody in the country. When we start thinking too much, I miss a shot, I miss a free throw, I struggle playing, we got to get through that.

But we've shown who we are. We can beat anybody. I hate to tell you we can compete with anybody, too, if we're not fighting, playing desperate. Refuse to lose, just do what you got to do. Didn't do it today.

Q. You mentioned after the tournament game last year that even though you had a veteran team, they were a group of guys who had not experienced post-season. Is there a way to teach a group of guys how to win in the post-season, or do you have to break through and do it?

JOHN CALIPARI: You've got to break through. You've got to break through. Breaking through is your mindset. It's a champion's mindset, which is I'm going to make the plays I'm supposed to make, and we're going to do this together. You trust your teammates.

We had breakdowns. You want to talk some of the layups, there was miscommunication. The guy breaks through, he was supposed to be picked up, he wasn't picked up. We had some of those today.

But I still believe in this team. I think this team can go on a deep run. We do got to get healthy. Jacob didn't practice but one day last week. Cason practiced one day last week. I wasn't even sure they were going to play. I thought we were going to end up having to do what we did at Arkansas: just figure out how to get it up the court. That's what I thought we were going to do.

All of a sudden we can go, but they did not practice. Neither did CJ.

Q. Obviously not the way you wanted it to go, but what do you think this team have learned the small margin of error you have?

JOHN CALIPARI: I told them that at halftime. This is post-season play, this is what it looks like. If you give a guy beer muscles, they take advantage and run with it.

But you got to make it to where it's not three, it's one, or you're up one. Can't be six. The rim is that big. You're making free throws. At one point in the game the rim is a little smaller.

We never got to it. We got it to three and never busted through. We had opportunities. We really shot 11 for 22 from the free-throw line. We missed two front-end one-on-ones. You're not winning a good game shooting 50% from the line. You're just not. Especially if the other team shoots 90-some percent.

We gave ourselves a chance. I'm disappointed. Take me 24 hours to get through this, and let's go and we'll prepare for the next tournament.

Q. There doesn't seem to be, nationally, a team out

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

there like Gonzaga maybe in the last couple years, Baylor. To you, does the tournament look as wide open as it's been in a while?

JOHN CALIPARI: I would say it does. But my concern is my team. I got to get these guys playing like we have this year to where we're walking into the tournament in that mindset of, look, here we go together, let's do something crazy. I got to get them to that.

We had two good days here where I thought they were in a good frame of mind. We were fine until we got punched. That's when we're not what we need to be.

But it's going to be an interesting tournament. I don't know where they'll seed us. But we're going to have a bunch of teams in from this league, and I think people will find out this league was as good as any. You talk top to bottom, I mean, there were no easy games.

Q. Guys in and out of the lineup all season. Heading into this tournament, how important is it to be as close to full strength as possible?

JOHN CALIPARI: We've got to get three or four good practices in with a full team. It's going to be vital. It will be vital. We have to have them on the floor. I haven't checked to see where guys are, but we're going to have to do that.

We need a couple days to just recover from stuff right now. So next couple days we'll probably need the recovery. Then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, let's go, let's get something done.

Amazing, at this time of the year we're still teaching and still talking them through stuff, getting them to visualize different things that are happening.

I like the team. We got a little bit of everything. We out-rebounded them by almost 20 rebounds. Make free throws, make your free throws. I mean, we did some good stuff, but they're a good team, too. They made shots, and we missed shots. You won't believe that's what this game is about.

Q. In a normal season you'd want the momentum riding into the tournament. With this team, some of your biggest tournaments have come immediately following losses.

JOHN CALIPARI: That's what we're going to talk about right there. Every time we've taken a spill, the whole country jumps on us, it seems like they come back with a vengeance. That is the plan. We got beat.

Some of the games we got beat, it's not like we got beat by a hundred. It's a bucket here or a bucket there, you get beat. But learning how to win is a big part of this, too. We've won some really good games against really good teams. There are teams across the country in their tournaments losing.

The one good thing, it's going to be nice to play somebody that doesn't know us that well. This is the third time we've played Vandy. They know us, we know them. You know what it's going to be, the physicalness of the game. Get in the tournament, it's not that way.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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