

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 15, 2024

Kentucky Wildcats

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach John Calipari

Tre Mitchell

Reed Sheppard

Postgame Press Conference

Texas A&M 97, Kentucky 87

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Kentucky. We'll ask Coach for some opening thoughts, then take questions.

Coach.

JOHN CALIPARI: Give A&M credit. They played a physical game. Did a great job. Defensively they made it hard. Just wasn't one of our better games.

I told 'em after, we didn't pass the ball to each other like we've been doing. When the ball stops, we're not the same team. Go one on five, you can't make a play that way. We haven't for weeks. Today we kind of did.

Whether they did things to make us play that way... But they deserved that game the way they played. Again, I mean, we give up 97. How many games you going to win giving up 97 points? Two guards got 72 points. You're not going to win.

We got some stuff to figure out. But this is an unbelievable group that I'm coaching. All I told 'em is they got to stick together now. We've been on a run, it's all been fun, you win. All of a sudden you get dinged and now the real stuff starts next week. We got to be in the right frame of mind.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for either of the student-athletes.

Q. Tre, as one of the leaders of this team, what do you tell the younger guys about staying together, looking ahead?



TRE MITCHELL: It's pretty simple. We're not done yet. It's that simple. We'll get back in the gym, get back to work. We'll look at the tape. Coach will tell us what we did and didn't do, what worked for us, what we went away from.

At the end of the day we have a team full of hungry dudes that are going to stay in the gym. This minor setback is going to motivate a lot of dudes to play that much harder come the tournament.

Q. Reed, from what you saw with the 14 turnovers, was it something they were doing? Something you guys weren't doing?

REED SHEPPARD: I mean, you got to give them credit. They played a really good game. They were physical. They guarded well.

A lot of that was on us, as well. We didn't play like we've normally been playing. We didn't share the ball. We got selfish and tried to make home run plays, just try and take over the game by ourselves.

We'll learn from it. We'll get better. We got a bunch of dudes that know how to play basketball. We'll continue to get in the gym, watch the game, learn from it, then just continue to get better.

Q. Kentucky is a fairly young team. Had a little bit of extra time preparing for this tournament. Do you think there were any additional nerves coming into this game, extra rest that had you a little bit on a slow start?

REED SHEPPARD: Yeah, I mean, the coaches did a really good job of preparing us for the game. You got to give Texas A&M credit. They came out, they fought, they were physical. We knew it was going to be a physical game. We didn't play like we needed to play.

They hit shots. We got selfish. They deserved to win the game. They played better. But this was on us. The coaches did a really good job of preparing us and getting scout for the game.

We played 'em once, so we knew what to expect. We'll continue to get in the gym and grow from it.

TRE MITCHELL: Yeah, there's not much more I could piggyback off that.

We were prepared. We were. It's just a matter of when the moment hits, you got to show up and perform. You have to be able to adjust on the fly. Coaches were giving us adjustments throughout the entire game. There were moments where we listened and it was effective, and moments where we shot away from it. You see the result from it.

Q. What do you all take from this performance into next week?

TRE MITCHELL: I think it kind of comes back to things we dealt with earlier in the season. We're a completely different team when we don't move the basketball. I think this is just kind of emphasizing that for us. When we get to look at the tape, I think that's something we'll see immediately. I'm sure that will be something emphasized moving forward in practicing and preparing for March.

REED SHEPPARD: Just like what Tre said, we'll get back to Lexington, watch the game, get in the gym. We'll just continue to work on it and continue to get prepared for the next game.

We're excited. We're a fun group. I love all the guys. We got a really good team. We're all really, really close. We want to win. No one likes losing. We're all excited to learn from this and get back home and get working again.

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

Q. Going into the big tournament, how concerning is the defense right now for you?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, we've been working on zone. We were good for a minute. You make a sub, one guy gives up two threes. Part of it, we hadn't played it that much, but we were prepared to go to it if the guards kept getting downhill.

But you got to have plan B in that thing. I think we do. Crazy thing was there were times we weren't bad defensively. They just made, like, a tough shot.

When I watch the tape, I'll have a better idea. There were some times we had miscommunication. Get, not enough talking. A young team. They don't talk enough. A guy

can't hear what they're saying and gets clipped a little bit.

We have shown that we can guard the best teams in the country. We have shown that you can score a hundred on us. We just got to lock in and know we've got to get better defensively.

When you're not passing the ball to each other, and everybody's not touching the ball, it bleeds into your defense, too. But they did this to us down there, too. We knew. They only out-rebounded us by a couple, but their turnovers, points off of turnovers, 18, ours was 4. But we shoot 50% from the two, 40% from the three-point line. Nine blocks. Pretty even. 21 assists. Just got to guard better. 87 points is enough to win most basketball games, unless they score 97.

We're going to have to lock in. Again, I keep coming back to offensively, whoever I put in, we seem to be okay. Some defensive players may have to step in there and let's get it locked down.

We just weren't ourselves today. I want to give credit to A&M because they played well. They did good stuff today. They made more threes probably than they have in a while. Give them credit.

Q. How much of not being yourselves is attributed to a young team, every possession matters?

JOHN CALIPARI: Much of that is your first game is the hardest one. I told them that. I've done this a long, long time. Been in a lot of these kind of tournaments, a lot of NCAA tournaments. Hardest game is the first one when you got a team like we have. When you get by the first one, a little bit more of a downhill run.

There's teams around the country right now losing this game because they're learning it, that that first one's a hard one.

Now, I think they'll know when we talk about it next week, that wherever we end up, we're going to have a tough first game. It will be hard.

Q. With such a young team, will it be easier or harder for them to shake this off?

JOHN CALIPARI: I think they'll be fine because of what Tre said. They're competitive. They got a will to win. Their body language... When we walked in at halftime, they were so good at convincing each other we're fine. We started pretty good, and then it's a couple foul shots. All of a sudden you can't get it any closer.

Again, the guys that didn't play as much, Aaron, just how the game kind of played out. Justin. I mean, we need those guys. When they play well, we win. That's the stuff that we need to keep an eye on and just make sure they know you've just got to be ready for your moment. It's hard if you're not playing as much. But you got to be ready for your moment.

The rest of their basketball lives, you better be ready for your moment. No excuse, no nothing. Just be ready.

I got a good team. We're young. We're young. We had some really bad turnovers today that led to baskets. When you're talking a four- to six-point game, eight-point game, but you gave them three breakaways, think about that. I'm chalking it up to, you know what, they played really good, we didn't play as well as we've been playing, and you lose. Now let's get these guys ready.

I'm excited about going into this tournament. I am. When you can score the ball, you got a chance. Now, c'mon, let's just guard a little bit. And we did it at Tennessee. Tennessee is one of the best teams in the country. We did it at Auburn. Alabama in the end. So we can do it. It's are you locked into that more than anything else?

Q. The players are frustrated because they wanted to win this. You've been vocal about it that this tournament doesn't matter as much, it's the big one that matters. That's true, but they still have to go out with the mentality that they have to win. How do you balance the message?

JOHN CALIPARI: You know what this is, this was about seed. It was also about our fans. I told them that. We got a lot of people that traveled, spent money. This is their opportunity to watch this team. But this tournament for us was about the seed. You got to win and you got to advance to improve your seed.

We had every chance. All that's going around the country, we had our chance. But we had to go and play well today. You do know how many games my teams have won in this thing, championships? Like 16. We are playing to win. But we're playing for a bigger picture, which is that seed.

I don't think that affected them that way. They wanted to win this game. They were frustrated and disappointed. I felt for the fans. I said it to Tom after on the radio. You want to win for them. They put everything into being here, all that. You want to win for them.

But our kids did, too. I told them, When you walk in this arena, you're going to think you're in Rupp Arena. Let's go play for 'em, have some fun, let them see who we are.

Some of these people can't get in Rupp Arena. Let's go.

Sometimes your teams don't play well. Sometimes they do and you advance and you win. Sometimes they don't. Especially young teams. We didn't do it today.

I don't want you to take away from A&M because they played well.

Q. A&M is on the bubble because of some bad losses.

JOHN CALIPARI: They got eight quad one wins. They're fine.

Q. Your opinion on what good wins over good teams like you, in your opinion, how does that measure against bad losses?

JOHN CALIPARI: I think they're fine. I think they've done enough to be in the tournament. The way they played today, if they shoot the ball the way they shot it today, they're going to win games. They're a good team.

Q. Tone obviously in foul trouble. How much does a night like this show you how much you need him on the court?

JOHN CALIPARI: I thought there were some opportunities for him to get shots before he got in foul trouble. Went through that little floater you have, he had two or three opportunities to do it. He never really got in rhythm. He made a couple. I thought at half, he makes that shot, now he's going to get going.

I'm going to say they're not machines and robots, they don't play great every night out. Can we say it's rebounding or the foul trouble? Can we say it's Texas A&M, the way they played? Reed didn't get as many shots off in the second half. We're trying to get him more shots. They did a good job. Couldn't quite get 'em off.

Yeah, we need him. We need him. Again, we need all of 'em. We need everybody on the team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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