

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 14, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Arkansas Razorbacks Coach John Calipari Darius Acuff Jr. Trevon Brazile

Postgame Press Conference

Arkansas 82, Oklahoma 79

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Arkansas. We'll take opening comments from Coach Cal and then questions.

JOHN CALIPARI: We knew it was going to be a hard-fought game. Oklahoma has won six in a row in this league. Porter, I told them, he and I have talked on the phone prior to this game, I said, This may be your best job ever of coaching.

Folks, when you're winning, it's a different thing. When you're struggling, that's real coaching. How do you keep 'em up? How do you get 'em involved? How do you keep 'em believing when you're struggling?

He did.

Then the other thing is, how do you get individual players to be their best ever when your team is struggling? He figured that out.

Chris has done the same at Mississippi. They're still playing. They were struggling not three weeks ago. I mean, we got some unbelievable coaches in this league. Obviously you're talking Missouri, Oklahoma. Those teams, Texas, they should all be in. If you're in this league and you win seven, eight in a row, like Texas, or you do the things that Missouri did, you should be in.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the players.

Q. Darius, that last jumper that you made, was that a set play off the inbound? Something that kind of came



up on a whim?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Nah, it was a set play, but the original play, not take it out, but Coach switched it mid-play and put me inbounds. That was all him, for sure.

JOHN CALIPARI: No, it wasn't me. That was him (smiling).

Q. Darius, you didn't play against Missouri. A while between games for you. What have the past couple weeks looked like? What was it like for you to knock off any potential rust?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: It was a lot of work, for sure, training room, gym, whatever it was. But I was still excited. The guys won a game down in Missouri. That was all I was happy about.

I wouldn't say I really had rust. I was excited to play. So just playing the game, that was all I cared about.

Q. Trevon, with Darius, that was the second most points an Arkansas player has ever scored in an SEC tournament game, what is it like to play with him?

TREVON BRAZILE: No, I mean, he's a very special player. Obviously we seen it tonight. Not only tonight, all year. That's why he got Player of the Year. It's been great to be able to play with him this year.

The little two-man game, he's been good for us all year, so...

Q. Trevon, a chance for revenge against the team that knocked you out of the SEC tournament last year. Is there a little bit of extra motivation?

TREVON BRAZILE: I would say we're just trying to go out there and get a win. We know that's a really good team. They're going to come out and play really hard. Well-coached.

It's not really no revenge or nothing like that.

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Q. Darius, the fade-away jumper in the corner, catching that ball so deep in the corner, no doubt you were going to go up?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Yeah, I knew I had to get one. It was only five seconds. I was in the corner. If I would have taken a dribble or anything, I would have been stuck. I knew once I came out which shot I was going to take, for sure.

Q. Darius, with the season that you've had, do you look around the rest of college basketball, other freshmen, who are having strong seasons? Do you look forward to what you and the rest of you all might be able to do on this stage?

DARIUS ACUFF JR.: Yeah, of course I see it. I know most of those guys. They're all having great years. They're playing special. It's great to see all the young guys playing great.

But like I say, I'm just focused on my team. Just winning games for my team.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, you're released. We'll continue with questions for Coach.

JOHN CALIPARI: Let me say one thing as TB is walking off, was on the set of the SEC, and the guys, he is the key to our team. Darius has done this. But if we want to be special, TB does when he does in the second half of this game, and we're really good.

He's an important piece of this. Malique Ewin was good today. I thought he played well. A couple plays on pick and roll. Back too far, but... He ran the floor, like sprinted, got a dunk. That's encouraging.

Q. You mentioned how important Trevon has been. A quick 6-0 run in the second half where it was really him that made it happen. Darius didn't score any of those six points. How big was that stretch? How big was he?

JOHN CALIPARI: I'm just trying to figure out where is he when he offensive rebounds. I've broken down the tape. Anytime he's around that free throw area, we shoot, we miss, he has a chance of getting the ball. He either gets it or almost gets it and sticks it back.

Now I'm trying to figure out some ways when we're running offense, he's away, how do I get him near that free-throw line because he will offensive rebound.

He didn't make shots today, but he made two huge free

throws. That tells you something. That's a mental toughness. Yeah, I missed every jump shot. He's been making 'em. He missed 'em today. Fine. Do all that other stuff. Make your free throws, get second shots, do a double-double, get a couple blocks. That's who you are as a player. You don't have to score.

Billy sometimes misses shots, but he does all the other stuff. If you look at the plus-minus, Billy and Malique Ewin were 11s.

Q. You said after the Texas A&M game, you said you wanted your players to teach themselves, lean on each other, let you step back. Have you seen them do that?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, they are. They're saying things to me in the huddle of what they may want to run or I'm asking them and they'll tell me.

But I also need them to hold each other accountable. You don't have to be mean to do it. But you got to encourage guys to do their job. You got to be able to say, C'mon, man, we're trying to win, do your job.

Coming from them is totally different than coming from me.

Q. March is when a lot of common sports fans hone in on college basketball, see someone like Darius. Put him in context for the fan who hasn't basketball following him all year?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, you're looking at a kid that can go in that league and have the ball in his hands and make good decisions and make shots. I don't want to put pressure on him. I've had a lot of really good -- 13 of 'em have become All-Stars, two of 'em have become MVPs. You're talking about Rookies of the Year, Defensive Players of the Year. He's right in there with them.

It's funny. Tyler Herro texted me and said, Does he live in the gym? You know somebody from the Miami Heat would ask that. Does he live in the gym? I said, Yes.

But lately he's lived in the training room. But yes, he lives in the gym. So does Meleek Thomas. Dudes live in the gym, which means they can miss plays, but it never fazes them. It doesn't matter what I say to them. If I say, You stink, they laugh, You're crazy, I'm one of the best out here.

Building that, and an NBA player knows, you build that yourself, it's not what the coach says to you or teammate. Yes, he lives in the gym. He loves it. He loves the game. He didn't even have a car. All this NIL stuff, he didn't have a car. He didn't want a car. I want to be into basketball.

Now, I say that kind of player who was pretty beat up, and I did the NBA thing, load management, sat him out a game, so that I could see if he could get healthy, and he did.

It could have backfired, but D.J. played great. Meleek Thomas played out of his mind. The other guys did what they did so we could go on the road and win an overtime game without him. I think it tells you about our team.

Q. Could you further expand on your relationship with Porter, what makes him such a good coach and why this is a tournament team.

JOHN CALIPARI: Because he's a good Catholic, that's why (smiling).

He is one of the good guys in our profession. You all know his career, what he's done. I say when you have a guy like him, then administration's got to do their thing and put around him. I always say coaches win games. Administrations win championships. I've said that for as long as I've coached.

We can do our thing, but they are going to win a championship because they choose to. They choose to invest in it. They choose to do all the things that a championship team has to have and needs to have.

He's a championship coach. I mean, he is. He is a terrific guy. I've talked to Chris throughout the year, too. Like last year when we were 0-5, Chris called me. Don't you forget who you are.

I said, I've already forgotten, by the way.

I called him this year. Called him a couple times. Like I said, I look at this league, and it's not only the facilities and the fans and all that, it's the coaches. None of the games are easy.

Q. Holding Darius out of the Missouri game, seems to have paid off well today. How much have you seen that pay off? How much healthier does he seem to you?

JOHN CALIPARI: I'll go back to the hotel. He'll have treatment. He's on that training table six hours a day, making sure that he's right.

Let's see. Like, he may wake up in the morning. We got to play in -- how many hours do we have another game? What is it?

THE MODERATOR: 15.

JOHN CALIPARI: 15 hours. This is AAU. We play another game in 15 hours. Then we play another one...

THE MODERATOR: 24 hours.

JOHN CALIPARI: Less than that.

THE MODERATOR: 21 hours.

JOHN CALIPARI: 21 hours later we're going to play another one if we get by the next one. You better win one first (smiling).

Whether he can play three games, I don't know. What if I don't think he can? I'll sit him out because this is about him.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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