

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 14, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

## Arkansas Razorbacks Coach John Calipari Meleek Thomas Malique Ewin

Postgame Press Conference



Arkansas 93, Ole Miss 90, OT

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Arkansas. Coach, if you'd give an opening statement.

JOHN CALIPARI: Malique Ewin, double-double. If he can just stay the course, a couple breakdowns defensively, if he can just stay the course, okay? You saw Meleek Thomas light it up. He took one shot, the guy that threw it, grabbed it, it came out to him, and he just launched it. I'm like, Meleek, and it went in, great shot, kid. Way to go.

I almost have to let him do some of the stuff because it is who he is. He is a shot-maker. He is a guy that's not afraid. What Malique is giving us is that one more size inside that makes it pretty good.

I apologized to the guys during the game. Should have called a timeout so the kid couldn't run it up the court and shoot a layup. I was going to until I said, Do they have a timeout? No. I did not want to give them a chance to talk to their team. I should have called a timeout, and I didn't. Almost cost us the game.

They fought, and we won it anyway. I told them, I'm hoping I help you win many more games than I create something that has us lose.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

**Q. Meleek Thomas, for you as a freshman, had such a big impact in this game to get you to the tournament final, what is that like for you? What was the defense giving you that worked today?**

MELEEK THOMAS: I would really just say it's a dream

come true, first off. Somehow we dreamed about being on the biggest stage, battle with my team, which is what happened today. That was evident.

But I would just say the defense, they played me to the best of their ability. When I'm going, I feel it's hard to stop me from going.

**Q. For you in this game, Ole Miss being a more physical team, how important was that? How important was that stretch there? How important was it for you guys to win the physicality battle?**

MALIQUE EWIN: It was really important. They're a really good team. We tried to rebound them and just do the little things to get the win.

**Q. When you play a close game like you did last night, you sneak out with the win. What is that like mentally to play two post-season games in less than 24 hours that are both down to the wire?**

MELEEK THOMAS: I would really just say it's amazing, in my opinion, because we battled so much, we fight so much through the season. You see all types of teams. They throw all types of defenses at you.

Up to this point, we done seen every defense, scheme. Like Coach Cal says, it's just a will to win at this point. You have to want it more than the other team. It came down to us doing the little bit extra than the two teams that we played to get it done.

**Q. Malique Ewin, you're an experienced guy, going through that season, how important has not just your experience but the experience of other guys on this team been in this SEC tournament?**

MALIQUE EWIN: Our experience is important. Nick Pringle, he been through different teams, and he been through this plenty of times and won it. He was giving us thoughts about what he think about it, how we could go out there and get the win.



**Q. Malique Ewin, do your eyes light up when you see a smaller lineup in the interior?**

MALIQUE EWIN: Say that again.

**Q. Ole Miss went smaller in the post. Do your eyes light up when you see that?**

MALIQUE EWIN: I ain't even hear what he said.

THE MODERATOR: Do you like the smaller lineup?

MALIQUE EWIN: Yes, yes, yes.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, you're dismissed.

JOHN CALIPARI: I love bragging about coaches. The job Chris did, think about this, they struggled this year. All of a sudden at the end of the year, not only is their team playing, but individuals have gotten better through that struggle.

I thought, again, I'm watching 'em. Look, we've gotten better. We didn't play that bad. They just didn't give up. You think about what they've done and how he's done it, it's amazing.

But I'm happy with our guys and what we did. That was a hard-fought game.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

**Q. Tomorrow is the first time Arkansas will have played in the SEC Championship game since. What does it mean to bring Arkansas back to the SEC Championship game? What do you remember the last time you beat Arkansas?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I remember we won the game. But we always had wars back then, too. Like, some will get mad at me, but I think when you're talking about three games in three days, most important thing is taking it off this tournament and making it about our growth as a team. It's about holding our seed or improving our seed.

You have something to play for that's bigger than that. I think over the years, whether I was at UMass, Memphis or at Kentucky, and now here, it leads them to play better. There's less on their plate.

I told 'em after, if we had lost that game, I would have took all the responsibility. I want them to just play. They're young. I can take it.

But I thought we did stuff when we had to. Darius just

played okay until the end. Then all of a sudden he's making every play and every free throw.

I'm proud of these guys. Going to be a really hard game. I mean, we've gotten better. So has Vandy. Vandy is like, What? Tanner is back to being what he was. He took a couple weeks off. Now all of a sudden he's back to even being better. Now two or three other guys step up. You're like, Who the heck? When did he?

Whatever happened in the first game means nothing in this game, nothing. Just like what happened to us with Oklahoma or Mississippi the first time. Had no bearing on this game. It's going to be a hard game.

**Q. Vanderbilt's head coach said for Vandy fans to pack it out. Today y'all had intense fans behind you. How excited are you for this matchup tomorrow? How does that play a part in building your momentum on the court?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, it's more about our state. It's more about the university, the athletic department. We're bringing everybody together. I've always said, wherever I go, I want a thousand people to say without me Cal couldn't have done that.

Also you want the fans to understand they play a part in this, and they then feel a part of it. That means they are connected. They do adopt the kids. That's my grandson or I love...

Every one of these kids is a star in their own right when you do this right because everybody is going to love somebody different.

Let me say this. Terrific young people that I have on this team. Obviously we recruit that. When you have that kind of character, one, they can be coached, and two, they'll care about one another. It's the only way you build a team.

If they aren't that way and they don't care about anybody else but themselves, can't build a team, and it's no fun coaching. This has been fun for me.

Last night was ridiculous. We got to change this so you're not playing at 1:00 in the morning. It was hard on those guys. Really hard on me.

Now we got how many hours later?

THE MODERATOR: 19.

JOHN CALIPARI: We got 19 hours. We got to play another game. I cannot take a nap today. Why? You

can't sleep at night if you take a nap. That means I got to stay up after getting three and a half, four hours' sleep. That's why I didn't call that timeout, by the way, 'cause I didn't have enough rest to think right.

No, this team deserves all this. I remember last year at this time, at one point we were 0-5, but we were 6-10, had to win our last two to come here and win a game to get in the NCAA tournament.

Now we're playing for a seed. Can we improve our seed? I think so. If we can't, then why are we having this tournament, especially on Sunday? If one of us does something and doesn't move, I just don't know why we still do this. But I'm not a big tournament guy. Never have been.

**Q. For Meleek Thomas, he didn't have his most efficient game against Oklahoma, but to come out and do what he did today, what does that say about him to be able to step up in those big moments?**

JOHN CALIPARI: There is no one that would say to Meleek anything that would lead him to believe he's not as good a player as anybody in the country. He has otherworldly confidence. He could run for president someday because you have to be that way. You have to have so much otherworldly confidence that you're the best. He's that way.

I have to let him do some crazy stuff. But I get on him. He'll look at me like, You're nuts, you don't even know how good I am.

I love that. I love it.

Darius is different, but the same way. Exactly the same way.

But they've both gotten that because they live in the gym. They're both gym rats. Any moment they can be in the gym, they're in there.

**Q. You mentioned Darius earlier struggling a little bit early in the game. Clearly big to help you close.**

JOHN CALIPARI: Down the stretch.

**Q. Last night helped you close the game out. What does that say to him, if he does struggle, you don't worry about him at all in closing time?**

JOHN CALIPARI: The same reason: he has that otherworldly confidence that he will make the play. And for those two to be able to do that, you can't be afraid of not

making the play. It makes no bearing. If you miss it, I'm making the next one.

That was the game winner and you just missed it. Well, it went to overtime, I'll make the next two, that's fine. You have to have that mentality that you're not afraid to miss the game winner. Neither one of those two are. They'll shoot it. Even if I say, Pass, they'll shoot it.

**Q. Last year in Providence at the tournament you spoke about embracing your underdog and your underdog roots. Has there been some satisfaction in bringing Arkansas to that next step, back where you aim to?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, that's all stuff when I'm done doing this I'll probably look back and have my toes up in the sand somewhere and think, Wow, we had a good run.

Not now. I don't have a rearview mirror in my car. I just look out the front window. Let's keep going. So that's all nice. If you do this long enough, there's good stuff that happens. I've tried to make sure I stay focused on young people.

How about Bam had 83 points? How do you score 83 points in an NBA game with other NBA players? Crazy. I've had 12 guys score 50 points in that league. I held 'em all back if you talk to 'em (smiling).

How did we get on that? Anything else for me so I can go back and watch tape?

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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