

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 15, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

## Arkansas Razorbacks Coach John Calipari Darius Acuff Trevon Brazile

Postgame Press Conference



Arkansas 86, Vanderbilt 75

JOHN CALIPARI: Yes. Go ahead.

THE MODERATOR: Do you want to give an opening statement?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yes. It was a really good game. Two teams played well. We just happened to play a little bit better the last four minutes.

**Q. John, obviously, you win the SEC tournament for the first time in Arkansas, seventh time overall. You're the first person to do it in two different programs. It's your 16th overall conference tournament title. To have the success this early at Arkansas, what is that like for you?**

JOHN CALIPARI: So when you've done this a long time and you're in the business of young people, it is about the name on the back of the jersey.

Yes, we're doing it for Arkansas. But me, I'm so proud of D.J. Wagner what he did the last rebound he got, the 3s he hit, how he defended, the energy he brought. I am so happy for Nick and what he did, because Malique did not play well. All of a sudden I'm proud of him because it's the first time he started that way. In the last five minutes, the reason we won was Malique Ewin. Then you have Meleek Thomas. I went down on the bench because I wasn't going to put him back in, not because of him but because of what was happening on the court. And I walked down and I said, Listen, I'm going to stick with this group.

He looks at me and says, I'm good. I'm great. And I hugged him. And then I gave him a kiss on the cheek. He

was, like, what the hell?

But you look at Billy. You look at how much Darius has grown. Not only as a basketball player, as a leader. It's incredible.

That's what we should be in the business for. You want to win, but it's the name on the back that I'm in the business for.

Now, I've kind of been that way and done all right at every school I've been at. So you could say it's wrong, or you can live with it. You can be P'd off or P'd on. I really don't care. And so this was, for these guys -- can I tell them what I said in the pregame?

So I said, guys, it's another game. We're trying to get better. Let's see where we are. We're holding our seed. And Nick Pringle in the back said bullshit. This is for a championship.

And I said, If that's what you need me to say, great, let's go get this championship!

I mean, this is about them. I've done this so long, there's stuff you do you don't even know. I said it the other day. I don't have a rearview mirror in my car. I look one way. Out. That way. And so the stuff -- I've been blessed. Been blessed that their families let me coach them. Hopefully, I'm giving back.

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

**Q. Darius, for you, you now have the third most points scored by a player ever in the SEC tournament. The two guys above you scored that in four games. You scored 91 over three. What was working for you this week and what was working for you today?**

DARIUS ACUFF: Just my teammates believing in me. I have to give credit to them. They trust me with the ball and I got to go make the plays. Downhill was working all weekend and today.

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I just had to be smart with the ball, no late turnovers in the last couple minutes.

**Q. Darius, you had 30 points, but also perhaps more importantly 11 assists. What were your teammates doing so well off the ball to help you as a scorer and as a facilitator?**

DARIUS ACUFF: All the right things. They were cutting. They were sliding to the right spots. Couple times, I had a couple turnovers. It was on me. Once I slowed down, started using my pivots, I seen them cutting and sliding. I had to hit them and believe in them to make the shots.

**Q. TB, you hit the initial 3s. How big is that to hit the early shots for the confidence standpoint?**

TREVON BRAZILE: Anytime you see a couple go in early, you feel good. That definitely helped my confidence going down the stretch. Also, Coach Cal calling out in the huddle I was going to hit the dagger again, like he did at Mizzou. Him having that confidence in me, my confidence in myself, it feels good.

**Q. What's the plan for y'all when y'all go home, preparing for the tournament?**

DARIUS ACUFF: Just get back, practice, but making sure we're taking care of our bodies. Just staying in the training room, being smart in practice, and just playing our same basketball in the next tournament. Make sure we stay together. Make sure we stay a brotherhood. We'll be fine.

TREVON BRAZILE: He pretty much hit on everything.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, you're dismissed.

**Q. Coach, when you look at the game today, your team had 21 assists. What was impressing you so much about how your offense was moving and facilitating the ball?**

JOHN CALIPARI: We're undefeated when we have 20 assists. We talked about it. Quit holding the ball! The ball moves, players move, you end up having assists.

We sometimes grab it and we got some ball stoppers, and it's my job to say not acceptable. Whether I take them out or I start running offense, forcing motion. Pass, pass, pass. But when we do that, we're really pretty good. Shooting 50 percent from the floor, 30-some from the 3-point line.

We had been really good free-throw shooters until last

game. We're starting to rebound better. So we're going that way. My guess is we'll play Wednesday. Is there games on Wednesday? Okay. Playing here Sunday and having this kind of game, hopefully they'll say, let them rest until Friday. Not a chance.

**Q. Coach, you talked yesterday about how you came into this tournament last year, needing to win a game to make the NCAA Tournament. Much different scenario this year. You won the SEC tournament. Does that change at all how you think about the NCAA Tournament going forward?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Let's see where we're seeded, then I'll tell you. Let's see where they seed us. I think we've beaten Vandy twice. Did we beat them twice? I think so. But let's see where they seed us. Does this matter? I don't know. We're going to find out if it matters.

**Q. Cal, on that same subject, you talked about protecting the seed the last couple weeks. Do you think a win like today elevates y'all's seed?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't know. I don't want to get myself in trouble.

**Q. Coach, as a leader, what's your message to the team when you want to soak in, celebrate the win but also moving forward and looking ahead to the NCAA Tournament?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Celebrate the "W." We'll figure that out later. You try to let them know, I've got your back. If things don't go right, I'll take responsibility. Just play and have fun, and we'll talk about the NCAA Tournament probably tomorrow about -- the first game is the hardest game. After that, you get a feel that it's no different than anything else.

You've got to stay in your little corner. I said you start watching games and you're worried about people, and then they lose. It happened in this tournament. Two teams that my team thought we would be playing, they both lost. So you don't waste any time.

And as a staff, you don't either. You stay in your little corner, one week at a time, one weekend at a time, see if you can get to the third weekend.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned D.J. Wagner earlier. How gratifying is it for you, as someone who played for you at Kentucky, followed you to Arkansas in his third season, he's stayed the course in an era where not many players do that? How gratifying is it to see him play well in this game and win it?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Without him, we don't win this game. You can go so far as to say D.J. won this game. And he's playing with more confidence which leads you to be more aggressive. But you have to have more confidence. The kid lives in the gym. He's one of the greatest young people that I've ever coached, and I've coached a bunch of them.

He is -- the kid cares about me. He cares too much. He's one of those. He cares too much. But you know what? What he did today for him -- forget about me. For him. I just wanted to take him to another level.

And the same with Nick and the same with Malique. I grabbed Malique Ewin and said, You were unbelievable at the end of the game. Why did you start the way you started? That's what I said to him. You can do it. You're choosing not to or you're mentally holding yourself back. It ain't me.

How about this? He comes out every time he makes a mistake. I only play seven guys. You can't say that anymore. That one's out. So, you know, like I said, I'm happy for the guys. I'm happy for the university. I'm happy for the athletic department. I'm happy for the state.

But, again, my job is to coach these young people, and their parents have entrusted me with them. That's why I say it is about the name on the back for me.

Now, we know what our job is for the university, for the administration, for the state. But not at their expense. Won't do it.

**Q. Cal, you stressed defense on Tuesday. Did you see an elevated level of defense these last three games?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Yes. Well, yes. We're getting better, but everybody's still shooting 50 percent against us. Today, we were better.

Again, you know, trying to get us to be more energetic, more on the ball stuff to try to wear people out. But when you only have seven guys, you've got to be careful. You're going to wear yourself out. So we've got to kind of play it by ear.

And then Darius, like he will never take himself out of a game. Like are you tired? No. Well, you are. You're sitting down. So I take him out. But if he took himself out -- I told Trevon the same thing. You take yourself out, go put yourself back in. Walk back to the table after two, three minutes and go back in.

So, no, they've responded. And what Darius said going back, we've got to get treatment. I'm stunned he was able

to play three games, guys. I talked about if I have to hold him out this championship game for him, I will. He looked at me like I was nuts. I'm playing. I'll play hurt. I don't care. And then the kid does the stuff he does. I mean, he has grown.

He's another one. I'll tell all the boys that are listening. You pass on this one, you will regret it. All of them. You don't even know what I'm talking about. Is that it? Anything else before --

**Q. I mean, I guess my question was about building the energy. But, I mean, for this tournament, how do you plan on maintaining the guys and making sure they're prepped for every game?**

JOHN CALIPARI: We're going to enjoy this. We're going to my house in Nashville. I have a house here. We're going to there. My daughter works at Vandy. Dr. Calipari. So I make her call me Coach Calipari because I've got to call her Dr. Calipari.

We're going to the house. Watch the selection. Don't care where they put us. I literally don't care if we play on Tuesday or what seed. I don't. I'm teasing, but it's going to say a lot about these conference tournament, what they do.

So we'll watch. We'll get right to the plane. My hope is we're home by 8:00. And then tomorrow, I'd like to give them off tomorrow. If we do anything, it will be film. They just went three days, and they were wars. Oklahoma was playing the best they've played all year. Mississippi was playing the best they've played all year. Vanderbilt was playing the best they've played all year.

Those were our three games. Forget about the name, records, whatever you want to say. Really hard games. And those coaches, all three of them, have done unbelievable work to get their teams to improve and to be their best now, because that's what this is about. Can you get your team playing well at the end.

Thanks, folks.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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