

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

**Kentucky Wildcats**

**John Calipari**

Men's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with John Calipari. We'll go straight to questions.

**Q. You've obviously had a lot of talented freshmen, but you have a really big class now. What has that been like? As you get older, how do you deal with that?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, we've got some good veterans that have really gotten better. We've got a good group of young players that I'm excited about, and they've got great attitudes. They've got a toughness to them.

The biggest issue you have with young guys a lot of times is they don't understand the dogs stand out, if you got some dog in you. This team, our practices have been competitive.

The issue we're having right now is we have two of our big guys, seven-footers, that are going to be out a little while longer, so we've had to do what we've done without that.

But they've responded. They responded.

**Q. You had multiple kind of roster-building sagas throughout the summer.**

JOHN CALIPARI: What do you mean throughout the summer? What happened?

**Q. You had Big Z, obviously getting him enrolled. Tre Mitchell transferring late after a situation at his previous school. You had Onyenso who went into the portal and came back out.**

JOHN CALIPARI: Who did? Ugo?

**Q. Yes.**

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't remember that, but he probably did.

**Q. You have a lot going on in roster building. What is the difference in college basketball now building a roster versus how it was before? How did you end up with a top-25 team with all that going on?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Everybody's going through the same thing. Had you teams that had eight and nine players late in the summer. So we're all going through the same thing.

The one thing that's happened to everybody right now is new teams. Like they got seven and eight new guys. I've been through that once or twice in my career. It's exciting because it's so new to you as a head coach and to them, but it's also difficult to get 'em to come together, how quickly can you do it.

We're all battling the same thing. Wave have a couple in our league that have teams back, and they have a big advantage, and they should. They got a bunch of guys back.

The reality of it is we had a good group coming in, the guys that we got late, and I say 'late', were good players, adding to our team.

**Q. You mentioned Ugo, and Bradshaw, you said five to six weeks last week.**

JOHN CALIPARI: I should never do that because all of a sudden it was nine weeks, it means that they're ready for the NCAA tournament.

Look, they're on the right path, both of 'em. Ugo is a little bit behind Aaron because of the timing of his injury and the surgery. But they're both progressing really good, and we'll learn something each week about where they are.

I don't want to put a date or a time on it because what if they're earlier? How about this one: what if it takes them more time than we thought?

They'll both be fine. Those are surgeries and injuries that

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are pretty common. I feel good. They've got great attitudes, both of them.

Here is the other thing. They both gained weight, they both got stronger because they could not jump around and do that. Now all of a sudden you look at you go and Aaron and physically they probably both gained 20, 25 pounds of muscle weight.

**Q. Is it safe to say you expect one or both those guys to miss the start of the regular season?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't know.

**Q. How much does missing the basketball development this summer hurt them?**

JOHN CALIPARI: It will affect them. I don't know if they're both back or both not back. I don't know. But, yeah, that will take time. You weren't jumping. Now all of a sudden you're jumping. You were shooting shots and free throws without ever leaving your feet. Now you have to do it. It will take time.

But I think they're both really talented. They've got good skills. So it's the bump and grind of the game they're not seeing.

**Q. Tre Mitchell --**

JOHN CALIPARI: Anybody else want to ask me a question (smiling)?

**Q. How beneficial was it to get him in general, but now knowing you have those bigs out, how big was that?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Look, I wish what happened at West Virginia did not happen. We were the beneficiary of it. It wasn't planned. You're talking about all happening within a week. But you'll have to talk to Tre. He had a great relationship with Bob. He loved him. It's unfortunate, but it's good for us.

I think, again, my hope is that he's able to do some stuff and be seen in a way that helps him, too.

**Q. Kind of an ordeal getting Big Z into school. Now that he's there, any hurdles left with NCAA eligibility for him?**

JOHN CALIPARI: The academic hurdles are done. He's done well with that stuff. That was done well in advance.

The normal procedure, when he shows up on campus, they go through the other stuff, which is eligibility and all

that. But knowing that he played on a development team, the club he was in, all that, I feel good.

But they've got to go through the process of doing it. They'll ask questions and all that. Then when I got in his company -- and he does not shave. Like, he looks about 15 versus... He's a young player, 19, just turned 20. 20 three or four weeks ago.

I think he'll be in good shape, but he has to go through the process like every other foreign student would do.

**Q. How soon and how much is it fair to expect that he can help you guys?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, because it took so long to get him here, every week that went by, he got better and better and bigger, bigger impact. Oh, my gosh, he's King Kong. All of a sudden each week that went by, he got better and better.

He's a piece to the puzzle for us. He's 7'2", pretty skilled. He's just going to start contact in tonight's practice. So if you think he's ready to walk in, dominate a game, you're not thinking right. He's not.

But great kid. Smart. All that we've done to this point, 5-0, 4-0 stuff, some of the defensive stuff, he already has a good feel.

**Q. Recently it was announced that the Indiana series is coming back. From your perspective, what is the process of negotiating to have that come back (indiscernible)?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Mike and I talked. Wanted to do it. We had to move it back because our schedule, we have one of the toughest schedules in the country every year, so we moved it out a little bit.

I think it's good for both programs. Excited to get started with it.

**Q. For a lot of years, UK has been the flag bearer for the conference in basketball. Now it seems like you got a lot of company. What would you say has been the biggest reasons for the rise for the SEC as a basketball conference?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I made this statement probably -- well, I've made it for years. They asked me, What's happened in basketball in the SEC? I've said, Basketball coaches win games, administrations win championships.

What's happened here, all these schools have invested in men's basketball, women's basketball. They've invested in

facilities. They've invested in arenas, coaches' salaries, recruiting, all the stuff that you need to be good.

I've been a benefactor when I was at UMass, Memphis and here. We all know the commitment and what basketball means to the state of Kentucky. I've been a benefactor.

What's happened now, Jimmy Dykes said there were two or three teams when you first got in the league, now there's 9, 10 or 11. I said, yeah, because the schools are committed to it.

It makes every game a hard game. I mean, arenas are packed. Players are getting drafted. It's not just our players. Now you got other schools having draft picks. It's an exciting time in the SEC.

**Q. A couple years into the NIL era now. What do you think is the biggest issue with the NIL space right now? Do you think that donor-led collectives need to be done under the university umbrella?**

JOHN CALIPARI: How much time do I have to talk about this kind of stuff (smiling)?

I'll just say, we need guardrails and all that stuff. I think young people, they deserved to share in what's happening. They deserve their name on the back of their jersey, their signature, their autograph. They deserve that.

It's kind of gone beyond that now, and it's different. The one thing I'm happy about, some of our players coming in, they already had deals before they got to our campus, for trading cards, shoe deals, all this.

There's not as much pressure for us to have to do X, Y, Z. I tell every kid we're recruiting, if it's about NIL more than basketball, you shouldn't come here. The big picture of where you're trying to take yourself. Basketball should be the overriding factor, even though you'll do better here than any other place you can go, it's not why you come to Kentucky.

The transfer portal is another issue. My suggestion, again, I've said this before here, no one listens to me, my wife doesn't listen, I yell to the dog, he runs the other way, so no one listens to me as I tell you this. In the old days, you had five years to play four. You had five years. Within that five years, if you want to transfer without penalty, you can one time. If you had any other issues, family stuff, mental health, you take the year off to get yourself together, then you play. But you have five years.

We don't want to have 28-year-olds playing against 18-year-olds. I'm basically telling you what they do in high

school. You get so many semesters and you're done. You can't have a 15-year-old playing against a 21-year-old. It's the same thing, what I think we should do.

But again, no one listens to me. Name, image and likeness, my suggestion has been just let's make it transparent so every school's got to say what their kids are doing, not by name, because of HIPAA rules, but by number, whatever you want to do collectively, here is what we're doing.

Now we all know the truth about what's going on. If you don't do it, coach got to sit out a year. In other words, if you're hiding stuff, trying to do other stuff, you got to sit out.

Those are some things that I think we can do to try to alleviate what we're all dealing with. But that's just me. I'm not talking on behalf of our university. I'm not talking on behalf of the SEC. You asked me a question and I answered it.

**Q. Since you guys won the GLOBL Jam back a few months ago, how has the team developed on the court with tactics, style of play?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Very good. I mean, the good news is some of the guys came back knowing that they were going to have to elevate their game, elevate their weight training and all that, and it happened.

What we found out, we have a group of guys all for each other. That's been great. And we know we have a pretty good team, but we need to add some length and some rim protection if we're going to be that real group that can do something crazy. You got to have rim protection, and I think we'll have it in due time.

**Q. Talk about the SEC/ACC Challenge, especially your matchup with the University of Miami.**

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, we had a good thing with the Big 12, now with the ACC. I think it's great for both leagues. Our game with Miami is going to be really, really hard. Jim Larrañaga and I are good friends. He said, Why were your fans disappointed it was Miami?

I said, Don't even go there, no.

Miami is going to be a really hard game for us. Again, veterans against young players. Be a hard game. It's a good thing for both leagues. Happy to be a part of it.

Not really, but I'll say that for everybody (smiling).

**Q. You have a couple of new assistants here on your**



**staff, John Welch and Chuck Martin. What have they brought to the staff so far?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Chuck was on my staff when we were at Memphis, moved on and did some good stuff as a head coach and assistant. Brought him back. His son goes to Kentucky. It was kind of easy. He wanted to do it. He's going to be tremendous for us. Already had an impact on our recruiting. '24 is looking good. '25 is even better. So it's going to have an impact.

Then Johnny Welch had a 17-year run in the NBA. But I've known him for 20-some years. As a matter of fact, helped me put in the dribble-drive with Vance Walberg when I was at Memphis and came in and helped us really organized it. I just said, Hey, we're allowed to have you on the court, you want to come back, you want to get into college?

I had had his son on my staff as a GA. His son graduated. He's now in the G League doing some stuff for I think Denver. So he came back.

He's been tremendous. He's a guy that loves to teach, loves to be in the gym with the players. That's what I wanted him to be, that guy.

**Q. I know these two guys maybe didn't get as much attention on the recruiting trail as some of the other freshmen, but what are your senses of what Joey Hart and Jordan Burks can bring to this year's team?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I'll tell you, both of them, Jordan especially, Jordan went through pro day, and it's all the other scouts were talking about is Jordan Burks. They didn't know about him. He heard this stuff, He's only this, he's only there. They never saw him play. They saw him play. They were talking more about him than anybody on my roster.

Joey can really shoot the ball. There's always a place for a guy that can make shots.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

JOHN CALIPARI: He did the dunking contest. Let me tell you, you're in front of 17,000, you go do the first dunk. Instead of jumping up, you jump down. I knew, I looked at him, I said, What?

He said, I couldn't breathe.

I said, What do you mean?

I literally couldn't breathe. I ran in, no breath, I couldn't.

Then he got a little more comfortable, a little less anxious. He ended up having the dunk. The players went crazy. It was great to see the response from all our guys.

**Q. Historically Texas A&M has not been on a level with the teams like yourself. From your perspective, how close do you think Texas A&M is to being that caliber a team?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Geez, probably the team that will be picked to win the whole league. They've got a lot of guys back. They were terrific last year. They are physical. They defend. They run good stuff.

I would say coming back it would be A&M being one of those one or two teams that should be favored. Let me say this, and again this is with all due respect, A&M is terrific, love what they do.

But it's so hard right now to project. It's never been this hard. You could project anybody you want. Even last year all the teams that were projected, no, and the teams not projected, yes. Now everybody's in the same boat.

Well, he's got that transfer and that transfer. You're seeing it in football. There's some guys that you thought would be this, and they're not because they transferred.

It is so hard for anyone. Somebody wants to say my team is really good... How do you know that? Like, we're counting on guys that never played college basketball. Why would you say that?

Or you want to say, Well, they're not any good. Why are you saying that? Have you been at practice? Do you know something I don't know?

It's just harder for all of 'em. But if you're A&M and you got people back, Buzz should be walking around with a smile. I got everybody back, so let's go, let's see what happens.

**Q. Arkansas signed El Ellis from Louisville earlier this year. What do you remember about him maybe prepping from him last year?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, he's really good. They got a good player. He can get his own shot. He does it with distance. He can get to the rim. You could play through him. He's good. He's good.

**Q. There's a new coach in the conference now in Chris Beard. What is your familiarity with Chris? What do you envision some of the biggest challenges are for coaches despite what they've done before to succeed right away?**

JOHN CALIPARI: We played against one of Chris' teams at Texas Tech. They were ridiculously hard to guard. Defensively were tough. I know how good he is. My guess is they'll walk in the league... When you have those as staples, you're not going to be far behind, even if you're just getting started.

What he will find out, these are really hard games. This is now 10, 11 teams that are doing that kind of stuff. And it's going to be hard.

But he's good. He's good at what he does. I saw him. He looked happy. I think we're all happy right now 'cause none of us have lost a game yet. So we're so happy.

But he's good at what he does. He'll do fine.

**Q. A lot of question about your young talent. Can you talk a little bit about your veterans and what they are bringing leadership-wise this year.**

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, again, I'll give you an example. Adou is so much better than he was a year ago it's not even close. Both physically, skill-wise, less anxious because he knows what to expect.

I could say the same with Antonio. Antonio Reeves was not sure. Came from Illinois State. You're walking in, it's Kentucky, every shot is life and death. Now you watch him, sure of himself, no anxiety, talks more.

Tre gives you a veteran that can really, really play basketball. Ugo has been hurt. When you talk about those guys, everybody else is young. Everybody else is 18, 19 years old, the rest of the team. But I'm not complaining. I love the group. I love walking into practice every day. They want to get better. They're coachable.

We're talented. We're just young.

**Q. You talked about Antonio Reeves having to get comfortable last season. A lot of high major teams, as the transfer portal becomes a more popular option to build the roster, are relying on those jumps from mid-major players. What did you see as one of the biggest keys to him making that jump?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Took him a while. Took him a while. Wasn't till mid-season where he started busting through. The game at Mississippi, the game at Arkansas, where you could play through him, like, the whole game. It takes time.

Then coming back you just see a different player who's putting himself and our team in a different position. But it's

hard. A player from a mid-major to go in this league and say, I'm just going to go and dominate this league, it's hard.

Thank you.

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