

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Arkansas Razorbacks

## Coach John Calipari

### Men's Media Day Press Conference



JOHN CALIPARI: Let me just start by telling you, this is an adventure. My wife and I are excited about it. Going to be some work. Going to be stuff we're going to have to do. But I'm excited to let's go get the hands on it, let's do this. Got a good group. Really a lot of good stuff going forward.

Let me just open it.

**Q. What was the moment for you when you realized that you felt like it was time to leave Kentucky, and how did the changes throughout college basketball maybe impact things there at the end?**

JOHN CALIPARI: No, here's what I would say to everybody. I've talked about why I did what I did, and I've talked at length about it. What I want to do today is talk about the SEC. This league has gotten ridiculously hard. I want to talk about my team, my roster.

But I've talked about all that stuff. You can look it up and see what I've said, and it's going to be saying it over again.

I want to use the time -- nine teams in the top 25 and another team not far off.

I can remember being in this league, we got two or three teams in the NCAA Tournament. Now all of a sudden it looks like it's going to be 10 or 11 teams in the NCAA Tournament. Every game we play on the road, going to be ridiculous.

Our home sites in this league, ridiculous. Facilities, the investment in coaches, you've got coaches and players that all are at the top of their game. And for us, like, we're a little beat up right now, but I like my roster. I like the guys. Some vets, physical, some young kids that are talented, too. Some of the transfers.

Here's the great thing I'd say to all of you that no one

asked me about, well, what freshmen are you going to get?

They wanted to play for us. That's what they wanted. I think the commissioner said 40, I think it's 48, first rounders. I think it's 30-some lottery picks and four No. 1 picks. Kids want the challenge, and they want to come in, and they want to earn their way.

Like I said, this is an adventure. I want to have fun with this. I know the challenges. I've been in this league. I know how hard it is.

But this is something that I'm really excited about.

**Q. Cal, I think you brought Aidoo with you today. What can you talk about his growth over the last two years and the starts and stops with injuries? What can you expect from him this coming season realistically?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, he's growing into his father, which would lead me to tell you, I have four players on this team that I've coached their fathers. Now, you can say that I'm an old fart. Or you can look at it and say, wow, that all of those fathers say I'm not as hard as I used to be, but they still wanted their son to play for me, Aidoo being one.

Aidoo wanted to play for me when he was in ninth grade and he was 5'11". I looked at his dad and I said -- dad was 6'9", and now all of a sudden he's grown into his dad. You see him now, and you're like, wow. But it took him time. He was a three-star player coming out of high school and grew, and now he's growing into his game.

He's been a little beat up here the last week and a half, two weeks. Hoping he'll be able to go against Kansas, but I'm not sure. If there's any question, I'll hold them out. The biggest thing, he's got to shoot the ball better. The game has become skill is king, but he's shooting it better, he's physical, he drives it, he can play multiple positions. Really happy for him and happy he wanted to play for us.

**Q. We knew Kansas was going to be a big exhibition game. They're ranked No. 1. How much does that add to it? I guess you're 16th at SEC media days, but obviously you're here for Arkansas. Does the day feel**



**different?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I'll start with the second question. No. So yesterday -- I probably shouldn't tell you this. But I did a COVID test because I thought if I had COVID, I wouldn't have to come. My wife called me and said, not happening, you're going tomorrow.

So I've been to a lot of them, and it's something we have to do to really -- they were really important before because we had to promote our league in basketball. No one looked at us. Now all of a sudden we're like it in basketball, too.

So yeah, it's not really changed. But the importance of it has always been let's get the word out. Let's brag about each other, brag about the coaches and the players and really tell the story of what this has become.

The investment people make in basketball has changed drastically on the campuses, drastically. Facilities, home-court advantage, the investment they've made in recruiting and travel and all the things that make the league special across the board, these schools have made that kind of commitment.

What was the other question?

**Q. It was going to be a big deal playing Kansas. They're ranked No. 1. I know it's an exhibition game, but does that add a little juice to it that they're No. 1?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Probably to our fans it does, but to us, we knew they'd be good. We know it'll be a hard game for us. We're hopefully going to have a somewhat full team, so right now we're down three or four guys, so hopefully a couple of those guys will be okay to play in that.

But Bill or I, neither one of us, would push a player because of an exhibition game. If he needs to sit out, he'll sit out.

One of the things I want to tell you that I've done everywhere I've been, you've got to take your team to your people in the state. So we've done that. We've started being -- I've probably been to nine different cities. This weekend we were in Hot Springs and Pine Bluff.

And then you're doing stuff. You're trying to connect to let people know it's more than just basketball, and we know it's your team and we're coming here to bring the team to you. You don't have to come to the mecca of Fayetteville. So that has been a fun part of seeing the state, seeing the people in the state.

We did a samaritan's feed at a couple different places. Gave out 5,000 pairs of tennis shoes, the players did, so it's been good.

**Q. What do you need from D.J. Wagner as a player? We saw him suffer through last year with an ankle injury, just showing he can sacrifice for his team as a player. What do you need from him playing next to Nelly Davis and in that backcourt?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Just want his swagger back. If you saw him right now physically, if you saw him with his ankle, he's running up, dunking balls, stuff that he couldn't do a year ago. People forget he was Freshman of the Year three or four times before he got injured. I mean, he was playing at a high, high level, and then he never really came back from that.

The first thing that happens is you're not jumping the same, so what does it affect? Your shooting. That's what it affects. Now, I've not coached many that are as coachable as him, that care as much. I even tell them sometimes you care too much. You care too much. Go make plays. Go fail fast. Do stuff.

But he and Boogie together in the backcourt with Nelly, we've got three pretty good guards, and that's why practices have been fine even though we're a little shorthanded because you've got guys that are really playing.

**Q. You mentioned the growth and how much better the SEC has gotten over the years. To have the guys who are following you from Kentucky and Jonas Aidoo, guys experienced in the league, how big is that, especially looking ahead to playing in the SEC?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, when you take over a program and you asked to see the team before you do your presser and there's no team, you'll want guys that at least know the league. So we have some guys that know the league. But until you go through this gauntlet that we're all going to go through, and we all went through it last year -- I mean, teams got beat that, wow, I can't believe -- yeah, because it's a gauntlet.

So, yes, having those guys is an advantage. But the young kids are going to have to go through it because it's not what you say, it's when they go through it and they say, okay, I get it.

That's why I put the schedule -- we play TCU on the 1st of December down in Dallas. We have Lipscomb at home. We have Baylor in Dallas. We have Illinois, Michigan, Miami all before December 10th. Well, why are you doing

that? Because we need to know where we are. What's our team? What do we have to do? Let our fans see where the team is. Here's where we are.

Because right now we're undefeated, and they're a little up in here, and I'm like, dudes, calm down. I try to tell them I don't have a magic wand, I'm not a magician, it's not what I do. It normally takes a couple years for me to get the culture right.

Now, will it be less? Maybe. It may be more. But the culture has to be right. What you expect, what is unacceptable, will they do more than expected, do they understand we're here to help each of you, but you can't do it for you. You take what you want. You're not promised anything. You're going to play every day against really good players who are as good as you and have the same aspirations.

Well, I don't want that. I want that fugazi, let me go somewhere where I can just go play and he'll promise me and they'll do this, I'm going to be the only player, fugazi. Or do you want to go fight and take what you want? Those are the guys that come here, the others don't, and that's fine. Because at the end of the day, this is who fights. In this league?

I remember our first game down at South Carolina last year, that was a fight, and they won. They won the fight. Then we learned to fight. We went on the road and won games then.

But this thing here, this is a man's decision to play in this league.

**Q. Cal, when you got to Arkansas, how much of it was were you able to implement stuff that you already knew from Kentucky versus having to make some tweaks that you're so well known for doing?**

JOHN CALIPARI: The first thing is that culture, and then we used all summer to develop players. We didn't put any sets in. We didn't put any of the stuff in. It was all development, playing, attacking that lane, advantage, disadvantage, reads when you're doing it, playing off of each other, spacing. So we only did maybe some 4-on-4, and then when they came back, we started doing more 5-on-5.

When you ask me how much of last year? Some. But these guys are showing me new stuff. I'm stopping and saying I like that better. Let's change it. What he just did, that's how we're going to do this.

I told them all year we're going to change. If something

doesn't work, you've got to make it work. It doesn't work, try something else.

The biggest thing for this team, which I hope that we put this roster together to be a better defensive group, they're more physical, they're older. What I found out when you try to have seven, eight freshmen and you're going against an older team of 24-year-olds, 23-year-olds, that's a big difference, and especially in big games where they are more mature enough to play through than with young guys.

But we still have young guys. We've got three freshmen who are going to be really good, but they've got the veterans around them. Some transferred, some transferred in, or transferred with us, I should say. That's D.J., Aidoo and Zvonimir, who's doing some good stuff. Zvonimir, we're trying to play through him and do stuff.

But the culture is the first thing and teaching development. Before you can teach how we're going to play, you've got to teach them to play. And I've always said a coach can stop a play, he cannot stop a player that can play.

So we're trying to teach them all, here's what you have to have, these skills, to play the way we play, dribble, drive, space the court, positionless, here are actions that we're going to run to open the court, to touch the lane. Here's the opportunities for threes and all those things.

Last year we led the nation in three-point field goal percentage. Last couple years we've been in the top 10 in offensive efficiency. But we weren't as good defensively as some of my teams. My mindset, toughness, swarming, guarding your man plus one. We've done all that probably more so than I normally do when they got back.

**Q. Coach Pope was here earlier, said, You'll never hear me say a negative word against Cal coach. He's a terrific mentor. Will be cheering for him every day like crazy except February 1st.**

JOHN CALIPARI: What's February 1st? That's my dad's birthday.

**Q. What can you say about your unique relationship in the couple early months for him on the job?**

JOHN CALIPARI: I think they hired a perfect guy for that job, and part of it is he played there, graduated there, has a heart for the place and has an idea what that is. When I walked in, I had Coach Hall. I had Coach Smith, too, but Coach Hall. It's a different place if you're just walking in. He's been there and understands it.

He and I have talked. I am fully immersed in what I'm

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

doing. I'm like, you won't believe this, I'm doing a lot of stuff, and I don't have time for any of the other stuff, any of the things out there.

But I'll be rooting for him. I want Kentucky -- come on, man, 15 years. I gave my heart and soul. I want them to do well, except -- what date? Okay, that date.

But no, he's a good man, terrific basketball coach. They hired the right guy. They really did.

**Q. I wanted to get your thoughts on the difference between coaching transfers and freshmen when it comes to implementing your system and kind of introducing your language to them, where freshmen are for the first time hearing it, a transfer you might have to reprogram the terminology or kind of their instincts of where they're going on the floor.**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, I've done graduate transfers before, and they were older. They had a better feel than a young kid would.

But I would tell you, when you're dealing with a new group every year like I have, it's all hard and it all takes time. Early in the year your team is not going to be as good. They're just not. Then as it goes on, if you've got a good group and they're connected and they're engaged, they'll start to come together.

I mean, we're all -- it's a different environment. I mean, having players, everybody be a free agent at the end of the year, it's made a difference.

Like right now, we were going to have eight, we've got nine because TB, Trevon Brazile, came in and said, I want to stay. Well, I didn't know that. But he wanted to stay. And I'm going to be honest with you, I'm happy he's staying. He's better than I thought. And I told the story. One day he's stretching out, and I looked and I said, You know you're better than I thought. He said, I told you.

But they come and they want to be here for a reason. They want to try to expand their game. Can you help me get better in different areas. All these kids have done it. I told you, four of them I coached their fathers, and they want them here. I kind of take pride.

Because of the shirt I'm going to let you ask the last question. Because you were raising your hand. You looked like you were mad that he wasn't going to call on you so I called on you. It better be a good question.

**Q. I wanted to ask about Carter Knox. You coached Kevin Knox --**

JOHN CALIPARI: That's right. And I coached the brother of one of my players. But that was only a few years ago.

**Q. Right. You coached Kevin Knox. I wonder is Carter the same type of player, and what can we expect from Carter?**

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, his brother was the ninth pick of the draft. Carter is more physical, lost 17 pounds already. He lost some weight. Skilled, learning situational basketball. But he'll fight, and he's good.

Obviously, Kevin had a great run with us. Played with Shai. But I'm looking for big things with Carter because he can play multiple positions. He's not locked in. If he brings it up, like rebound, bring it up, he's our point guard. He's been doing good stuff. Gotten a lot of reps.

When you have six or seven practicing, they get a lot of reps, and all of our freshmen have needed those reps, including Carter. But Billy Richmond has been pretty good. They're physical. They're not -- if you're recruiting freshmen now, they'd better physically be able to play against a 22- or 23-year-old, or it's hard for them to stand out.

Thanks, folks.

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