

University of Kentucky Basketball Media Conference

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John Calipari

Press Conference



JOHN CALIPARI: Yes?

Q. Could you elaborate on the McGuire family and any developments.

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, I was sent the picture and never even looked at who sent it to me because when I saw the picture I was like, like it hit me right between the eyes when I saw it. I had to find out later, because I went to the coffee shop, Which one of you guys sent me this? It ended up being Mark Hill. I don't know where he found it or where he saw it.

So when we put it out, we got businessowners -- I mean, you know. So when we found out who it was, I called and it was, we had Mollie McGuire's name. So what do you think my first question was? Did you marry the guy so your name could be Mollie McGuire?

But we talked for awhile, and what I got, because you guys are looking at it as though here's a guy -- and we know the power of basketball in our state. We all know it. You saw it when I went out this summer, and you see it. But my thought was, that's what this was about. He wanted to be there so bad that he was willing to leave without showering, without changing, just get in his car and go because he got out of the mine late. It wasn't about that. It was that he wanted to be there with his son. That's why he did it.

So you're talking about a miner, and I've said my family, I called my dad today. I said Clarksburg? He said it was Clarksburg. It might have been Shintown where my grandfather worked. And Mollie's comment to me is, My husband is humble. He's hard working. This is hard work, but he makes enough being there that I don't have to work. And he's a great father. He's done this many times. She said, Do you know his beard is red? And I said what do you mean? She said that was coal dust in his beard. So I said, Well, what did he say? He hadn't heard yet. What? He's still underground. What?

So then I called back after he got back home and it was,

they called me to the office. First of all, I thought I did something and I come out, they're cheering me. What are you people doing?

But here's what it is for me. You guys know me. For two years I couldn't go anywhere. We were COVID. Couldn't be out, couldn't, just awful for everything. But I've done some things that have been fulfilling for my wife and I. But this you would have to say you're bringing light to a good man, a hardworking Kentuckian and a coal miner, who does everything he can to make time for his family and his son and his daughter. Come on. That's what it ends up being. That's the story. And then it just went crazy. It went viral.

Now, I'm saying to you, you got hotels calling. We want to put 'em up. You got restaurants calling. We want to feed 'em dinner. You had a car dealership call up. We'll give you a car to drive out. Think about this. And isn't it neat for someone like that, who is a quiet, humble guy to know people appreciate you, and we appreciate what you stand for. And I appreciate it because it's how my family got their start in this country. The American dream started in a coal mine in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Now, backbreaking work? Yes.

So the other comment, I went underground in West Kentucky and I believe I went underground in that mine he was in. So the mine, there were parts of it that were 5, 6 feet high, 7 feet high, and then there were parts of it that were like 3 feet high, and I said, Well, how and what -- they said it's a duck walk. What? So I looked at the guy and I said, What if you, do you go up to have lunch, to go to the bathroom? And that's when the guy says, I can't remember his name, but he looked like John Wayne. We go down together and we come out together or up together.

And I put it on, when I got back, I put it on my team's wall and just said, Guys, this is us. You know why they hold each other accountable? Do you have to have the manager down there or do they hold each other accountable? It's life or death. If you're not pulling your weight, someone's going to say something. If you're not ready to be there, one of the other miners will say something. That's when a team it is empowered.

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And I talked to my guys about it. It's just a great lesson, and I showed 'em the picture yesterday of Michael and his son, and I talked about hard, backbreaking work that's honorable work, but that he makes time for his son, even when he knew he couldn't shower. He didn't matter what he looked like, he just wanted to be with his son.

So believe me, it hit home as soon as I saw it. Within five minutes I called KJ and said, Let's go. This one here, I'm taking care of this guy and his family. So that's the whole story, and I'm sticking with it.

Q. I hate to bring this up, but I'll get it out of the way. First of all, they say that those who ignore history have the same fate. What are you doing this year --

JOHN CALIPARI: Only a dentist could ask a question like that. He wants to take out your molars.

Q. What are you doing to make sure it doesn't happen again?

JOHN CALIPARI: Can't do anything to make sure it doesn't happen again. You coach a team and you play a game. You know what's great? In that game, that team was like my UMass teams, undersized, tough as nails, veteran team, more skilled than you thought, could have been in the Final Four, almost made it to the Final Four.

You play a team like that in a one-game shot, stuff can happen. It's happened to just about every coach you know. So my thing was, what can you do? The kids got crushed. I was worried with them going in a dark place. Some of 'em were in such a bad place that I had to send guys home to be with families, and it's the crush that came from that. They had to deal with it.

So for me it was more, Okay, how do I get these guys right. And then you use it as fuel. How are you going to guarantee it doesn't happen again? I'm not going to guarantee it. I can't guarantee it. I won't guarantee it.

I will tell you, we have a great group of guys who are great teammates that pick each other up, that challenge each other. And let me say this, that gives you a chance. The other means you're failing. Forget about postseason. You're not making it. This team is together, talented. I was just with John Y. Brown today for an hour, and I'll give you two stories that are kind of like the dentist. Okay?

So here are the two stories: One, John Y. Brown, we go for an hour. Okay? And we're talking. He's telling stories. I'm hearing about Kentucky Fried Chicken, the Celtics. Unbelievable mind.

And then as I leave the room, he says, Make sure you have three-point shooters.

I mean, in the ladies clinic. 500 women coming in all excited, working, the kids are working 'em out. One lady gets up and says, The stuff you're doing, the character you're teaching, all that stuff, winning and losing, Coach, you don't have to win another game by what you do to teach these kids.

And then two other women say, Yeah, but we want number 9, Coach. It matters. We know it matters because basketball here carries weight like it did in Pikeville.

Now that was a scrimmage. It wasn't even a 40-minute scrimmage. It was 30. 7,000 people paid, paid to watch a team, and then stayed after to get autographs and pictures. That's what this team means.

We know if you coach here and play here what it means. Now, here's the thing I'm telling you. I'll say this word to you people, but my players will never hear it out of my mouth. Bob Rotella comes in, our sports psychologist. He never -- we're not talking championship. We're talking playing against ourselves and how good can we be.

When your best player, Oscar Tshiebwe, is in the Bahamas and the fifth leading scorer and is cheering harder for his teammates than anyone else, it means you got a chance.

So we're talking about how do we become our best by every day playing against yesterday's performance, how do we get better, how do we get more consistent. We just played that scrimmage. I watched the tape. We stink defensively. What do you think we did yesterday the whole practice? Wow. What do you think we're doing today and tomorrow? Defense. And I told 'em, and I told some individuals, Look, if you want to play, if you think you're going to play, you're not playing. You won't play.

And then I told 'em, You know how many guys I have to play? Does anybody know here how many to field a team to play? There you go. There's five. I said I've only got to play five guys. And I've done that before. So if more of you want to play, you better defend. If you think you're avoiding contact because you want to shoot balls, you're not -- so we got a lot of work to do to be our best, and that gives you the best chance to go and do what you're trying to do, not worry about you have to do this.

You know what that's like? You got to win the lottery, Coach. You got to hit the lottery now. Okay. How many of you play the lottery? You do when it gets over 500 million.

100 million, it's not enough for you to play. You're all laughing because you're saying it's true.

Q. The veteran aspect of this team, how has that changed from early practices to allow you to move through things more quickly than in the past?

JOHN CALIPARI: The two things are, Bahamas and veterans. So the way I coach when I have veteran teams it's, Here's the drill, watch them, now go and do it. You don't have to break the whole thing down. You're watching. We are ahead offensively and we're behind defensively, and we, you saw it in that game. I mean, we played together, low turnovers. We did it. We're ahead offensively.

So now I'm like, okay, now we got to get this defense right. Our pick-and-roll defense was so bad it's like we never taught it. Players played their man and when they were off the ball they turned their head. It was awful. But by having veteran guys, they know and they can talk. One of the veterans talked to one of the young kids that had a tough game. He met him in the hallway, and this is what's great about having great kids. He said, Look, you got to put this behind you now. You go have a great night's sleep.

Stuff like this happens when you're playing here. Because every game is a Super Bowl for someone. This is the biggest thing in everybody's city that we go. So it's nice to have veterans that can say, I've been through it.

Q. I guess Jacob Toppin will always be a free spirit. There seems to be a new maturity level with him this year.

JOHN CALIPARI: A what?

Q. With Jacob Toppin, he seems to be at a maturity level that's growing up some and realizing what his potential is in front of him.

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, he went from being like 13 to he's about 16. But he is in the gym. He's become the gym rat. And every time I've had a guy like that, that guy breaks through. Now his thing is going to be physical play. If you avoid everything and you flip balls, I mean, you're going to play, but you can't be a significant guy, and he, rebounding in traffic, playing defense off the ball, all the stuff, you're not hiding. The greatest thing about the tape, it never lies. You see it.

Some of the stuff we put on tape yesterday, it really, the room was cracking up because some of the guys did some stuff like, oh, my God. I called it the cat move. He was walking around like a cat, like, versus bouncing and

playing. I call it, This is the cat. And you play it over and over and over and the whole room is cracking up.

Again, you can't, this thing is me holding them accountable, them holding each other accountable, and going from there.

Q. (No microphone.)

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, let me say this. Oscar didn't play, Lance didn't play, and Sahvir didn't play. The problem is there are guys that I'm planning on playing that were so bad defensively that you're like, Dude, you know you're not playing, right? And it's okay. I love you. You can stay at the house. I'll make you breakfast. You're just not playing.

So I think they get it. Look, we got a good group. We do. But anytime you think they know, you're making a mistake. You think they're ready. They're not. Like, we haven't done any zone stuff yet. Like, none. No zone stuff. You know people are going to play us zone. It's one of the ways they got to play. The good news is we can shoot. We got a bunch of guys that can shoot threes.

Q. (No microphone.)

JOHN CALIPARI: Offensively, he was really good, and what, he's behind some of the other guys, but so was Shai. So you can take it like Shai or Immanuel Quickley. And every time you perform you prove you should be playing, or you don't.

Now Adou, like I said, it's all the other stuff. The biggest thing he did is he made jump shots, which he hasn't made. But he made 'em in that. And I told him I was proud of him. And he went in with an attitude that, I'm going at dudes. And he did. And he's physically able to do it. He's still growing.

I mean, how about Ugonna? Both of 'em. You look at Ugonna. He's a 7-footer. And you say, He can run, he's skilled. Wait a minute. Unsure of himself. I'm having to talk to the kids about self-talk. You know, again, you look at 'em and, well, these are grown men, they should know they got to do this and that. They're grown men and they better expect it. What? What? They are who they are. I'm talking about self-talk.

Do you say, You're not your biggest cheerleader, you're done here? And the only way you can do that and be honest about it, look in the mirror and know you're not BS'ing yourself is get in that gym, and then you think you deserve it.

But Adou, Ugonna, how about Brennan and how he's

playing? Here's a walk-on that has been here and he could play like four positions. So he's been doing good too.

Q. Daimion had more jump shots in the last game than maybe all of last year, quick shoot, catch, and release with confidence. Is that something that you've seen has been growing in him?

JOHN CALIPARI: He's getting better. He's getting more confident. He's more self-disciplined. He's doing stuff that he needs to do. So I'm pleased with him. Again, shot blocking is a big part of this. So he blocks shots. That's what I'm telling Jacob. You should be blocking shots. That's a big part of what we do.

Q. What's the significance of C.J. playing as long as he did in the Blue-White?

JOHN CALIPARI: He did good. He did good. I had to stop him about 10 days ago because it seemed like he was pressing. And I said, All right, guys, when he shoots it, how many of you think it's going in? The whole team raised their hand. I said, So are you hearing this? Like we're all good with you.

But you haven't played for a year and a half. It's going to take time. Just talk to Jamal Murray. Don't expect this to happen overnight. You've been out a year. So now when you start playing it may take a month. So what? And hopefully that lightened the load for him. Because he shot the ball in the scrimmage.

And I'll tell you what else he does. He's an unbelievable teammate to lead. Telling guys, Pass the ball. Just pass it. We'll get it back to you. Move the ball. And he does it in a good way.

He also defended pretty good in that scrimmage. Which is what I told you. So it's just nice to see him. And you got to be happy for him. You think about it. He's been out a year and a half. And it's been freak injuries. Like in the layup line?

Then he got hurt on a break away layup here. And we thought it was going to be a long -- thank goodness it was like a three-day thing. But when he hit the ground we thought he was out for awhile. And I'm like, This kid's got bad luck. And it wasn't. But he's driven, he's wired. He's another veteran. Antonio, another veteran.

Q. You identified with him when you decided to bring him into the program and how have you seen that manifest over some games now?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, we brought him in to make baskets. Kind of like we did with Kellan. And he shoots it. And he can make baskets. He used to mess with the ball and now it's downhill running. It's driving through catches and getting in the lane. He bodies instead of try to avoid everything and flip and throw.

So that was one of my things to the team. If you're never drawing a foul, yet you're driving, probably playing you too many minutes. You got to get to the foul line on somebody. Or dunk on somebody. Don't avoid everything and flip.

So he's gotten so much better. And he doesn't say a whole lot. He talks on the court, but he's a quiet kid. He doesn't get my jokes yet. So sometimes he's looking, you know, I say something funny and he's like, I don't know, am I supposed to laugh here? I don't know if I want to laugh.

But he's a great kid. He really is. And he's, it's nice coaching some older guys. But also you got Cason and Chris who may be young, but they're physically advanced. They both are. Both been doing real good too.

Q. You mentioned Ugonna. Has he surprised you in any way over the past couple months? What is his pathway to meaningful minutes this season?

JOHN CALIPARI: The first thing that makes it hard is you're playing behind the National Player of the Year in every award. Unanimous. Which happened like 47 years ago. So you're playing behind that guy. Which means when you get in you got perform.

And you also got Lance. Who's been out, who's been hurt for 10 days or so. But you got him. And what's Lance do? I asked Lance to gain weight. I want you up to 240, he was at 233. He was at 217 last year. So now all of a sudden you got Lance more physical and able to hold his position. He makes it hard.

You got Daimion at 6'-11" and long. And you got Jacob. So you got a lot of guys there.

But who does what he does? No one. And that's why you just, you're going to get your minutes, you force me to play you more.

So, but he's good. And a great kid. And a great kid. But he's overwhelmed with how hard this is. We always tell 'em, You're going to see. And its, I got this. And then it's like, you know -- and trying to get him to understand that self talk.

You can either say, I can't do this. This is so hard. Or you

say, I love this. I'm uncomfortable, but that's what I want to be. I'm loving this. I didn't think I could ever do this and I'm doing it.

Then you come back tomorrow and you want to go again. Well, I can't believe it. This guy's nuts. He's doing -- well how are you going to practice tomorrow? You walk in. Let's see. I have a -- self talk matters. Especially when you're being challenged on things you have never been able to do before. Or you don't think you could do and you do it. You take it one of two ways. You make it negative or make it positive.

And your self talk is what it is. Building confidence is part of that, but you got to build your own too. Letting guys know that I want you to play aggressively. You're going to make some turnovers. I'm not taking guys out for missed shots. What do I take guys out for? Not shooting when you're wide open because you don't think you're going to make it. Then you can't be in the game. Shoot open shots. You come out when you pass up open shots.

You go 0 for 8 that's on me. Because I left you in. Now you'll probably be out before you get to 0 for 8 but...

Q. (Question about Sahvir.)

JOHN CALIPARI: The other thing is we got Tyler Ulis who is rehabbing and taking some courses in the gym with us watching and helping there too. But, yeah, he's way better.

And now he's just got to -- what I want to be able to -- and I told him, if I had known, if we back up the defense for him, it hurts him. If he's got to play a guy from the top of the key and in, it hurts him. Because it shows some of what he isn't. 6'-5".

When you pick up and you're disruptive in the full court and we give you space to be disruptive in the pick-and-roll, all of a sudden -- and your speed -- and now all of a sudden you're shooting the ball better?

I told him, You got to be guarded. You can't be a player out there that's not being guarded or you won't be in. So you got to be guarded. They got to respect you and your shot.

And he knows that. And he's in the gym. I just looked today, he was in there shooting and getting a workout in. The guys, we got guys spending time in the gym, I can say that.

Q. Is there one area that you're going to keep your eye on as the season progresses and say, We got to get better in this area to reach our goal?

JOHN CALIPARI: Biggest thing right now again is defense.

Q. Is that team defense or individual?

JOHN CALIPARI: Both. Well everything. Here's what I'm saying. We got guys, if they're playing the ball, they're good. The minute the ball is passed, they're no part of helping, they're standing, they're back. And you would say part of it is they get tired and they just let go of the rope. But you won't believe this. They don't let go of the rope on offense. They will still run and go get it and go. They just seem to let go of the thing on defense.

But I'm not concerned because I know what I'll do. The guys that are really guarding will be in there. The guys that aren't guarding when they get beat a few times, they will know, their teammates will be on 'em.

I remember the one year we said, We won't sub if you hold them under six points. You hold them at six or less we won't sub. Well they fought and if someone gave up a basket they were, Dude, guard your man. Help us here. And so that empowers them. We've got that kind of group.

Q. I know you don't pay a whole lot of attention to social media. You got a lot of supporters out there. But you've also had some haters. They say you can't coach and you've lost your mojo all that stuff.

JOHN CALIPARI: Why are all, why are you guys all -- amazing -- but why are you laughing? Shouldn't be laughing. He's allowed to ask questions like that. I don't pay attention to it.

Q. No, seriously.

JOHN CALIPARI: I'm serious.

Q. You look energized.

JOHN CALIPARI: Because I don't listen to that. I just don't listen to it. I mean, how I do this and preparing kids and someone said, Well, when will you stop? And I said, I would like to help about 20 more families before I'm done.

You may not -- look, some will say, You got to win this game and that game and if you don't win that. I'm helping families. They will be about winning when they know I'm for them. And so my job is to have their back. Their job is to have each other's back.

And at the end of the day, 50 years from now, people can look back and I hope 50 years from now they're talking



about the McLendon Initiative. I hope they're talking about Michael. I hope they're talking about stuff with the federal workers. I hope they're talking about all that. And then what we did on the court. Which is pretty good.

We've had a couple years of COVID. It's behind us. Let's go. But if someone said, when people say certain things, you know what I normally do? I agree. Can we move on now? I agree. Can we move on? I'm not going to get in a back and forth.

But anybody -- I want another tough question. Is this media day or coach's day?

Q. I don't know if this is a tough question, but you talk a lot about the freshman and that. Do you feel like you have to challenge the freshmen more this year?

JOHN CALIPARI: Any time I've had veterans and freshmen that really contribute we've had really good teams. So that's what I'm hoping this becomes. But we got -- the freshmen got a long way to go. Cason is probably a little more advanced.

And here's the thing with Cason. He's played all point because it's only him and Sahvir. I can put Antonio at point, which I did in the scrimmage, and he did pretty good.

The problem is whoever you put at the other point guard isn't the threat to score as much off the ball as you are on the ball.

So I think what you'll see with Cason -- I literally haven't played him off the ball since we started. I mean he's been the other guy. But we'll start some.

But it's important those guys and what they will do and what they physically can do and what they expect to do, all pretty good stuff.

Q. (Question about Oscar.)

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't know. But he's moving pretty good. He's moving around. He's got to stay off his feet. The kid will stay and sign autographs, take pictures. He's got to stay off his feet. So when he trains it may swell a little bit but it will go away. It will swell a little bit, it will go away. But he's telling me, he says, I feel really good, my leg feels good. I don't have the same pain, the pain that was there. He said it wasn't much, but there's nothing now.

And it's more that he's got to go through it. But my thing is, let's, we're not going hold him back, but you're not going to push him forward either. And his pace and timing may be

different than someone else. Someone else may be longer. Someone else may be shorter. I don't know. But I do know he's 252 pounds. He's big. Seven percent body fat on top of it.

Q. Do you feel like you have that, all the shot making, not just shooters but makers?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, look, you can't, I just read somebody, somebody just lost a game and said, We had all kind of looks. They just didn't drop. That stuff happens in this sport.

But I thought we had pretty good shooters last year. Led the league in three-point shooting for awhile. And I think this team can, they're good shooters but we need makers. You need makers more than you just need guys that will shoot it.

But we got -- I like the group. I like the guard play. I like the wing play. I like the big guys. We're doing it without Oscar right now. You put Oscar in it makes it a little bit different.

What will happen is where they will expect him to rebound. Right now they're having to go get balls, which is a good thing. But we're better with him.

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