

University of Kentucky Basketball Media Conference

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John Calipari

Press Conference



JOHN CALIPARI: Before I talk about the tournament, I'm going to talk a little bit, there's two things. I named Jacob and Lance captains. Now I never name captains, as you all know, but this is going to fall on enabling them to lead each other and to hold each other accountable, so those two.

Last week we had four guys not practice Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, including Jacob, who had a hamstring. And so they did not practice, the four of those guys. And again, this week I told 'em, You'll either practice Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or you will not start and you will come off the bench if you're a starter, and if you're on the bench, you're going to be deeper on the bench.

When you're just doing scripting and you're not competing, it takes an edge away. We have to compete before we go in. So those are just some things.

And someone said Jacob said he wasn't hurt. Well, Jacob knows not to make an excuse when someone beats us. He knows. We give them all the credit. We don't take away from their win, and we weren't going to, and that's why he said what he said.

But, like I said, we've got to make some adjustments on how we're preparing and what we're doing.

Questions.

Q. They have to practice all three of those days or just one?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, no, they're going to practice. That's what happened last time. They practiced on Thursday. So now we didn't, it was, we weren't the same. So you got to be here practicing or you're coming off the bench and you're not going to play as much, unless you get in there and we need you and you play well. Okay, we'll leave you in.

But, no, I told 'em, Monday, Tuesday -- the only guy I'll give some dispensation will be Sahvir because of the injury that

he has. But I just told him, If it gets rough and you want to step off, I'm okay with you, because he wouldn't in all likelihood be starting anyway. But he's, he practiced a little bit but wasn't live up in Nashville.

Q. They were trying to find an angle for you guys and they found it, you get to play against Bryce Hopkins, your former player. I saw your big smile.

JOHN CALIPARI: Bryce is such a great kid and he's a terrific basketball player, and he had an unbelievable year for them. So the guys smiled, the guys that knew him. We all like him, a player out there that we enjoy being around. He is a wonderful person, and so is his family.

Q. (Question about the opposing coach.)

JOHN CALIPARI: Ed and I have known each other, we were assistants, well, I may be a little bit older than him, but he was an assistant as I was moving through the ranks at UMass, but I've known Ed, Coach of the Year a year ago, is a great coach, great communicator, motivator. He's terrific.

Q. After games like Friday it's usually that this --

JOHN CALIPARI: How late? Tell me how late.

Q. Pretty late. (Laughing.) Your team has responded time and time this season again after adversity. So just how much confidence do you have going into the post-season like this, that they can respond?

JOHN CALIPARI: I think they're going to be fine. Look, when I woke up on Wednesday, I was going to hold all four of those guys out of that tournament, at least the first game. But the players wanted to play, they wanted to win the tournament, and you know what? They're pretty -- they said, Our fans bought all those tickets. We got to go play.

And I said, You know what? You're right. But I will tell you that we have played well when everybody said they're done, stick a fork in 'em. So this is a team that if we're focused and we're gritty and we're prepared physically and in the mindset we need to be in, you know. But teams have played out of their minds against us. They seem to

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figure out it's Kentucky, and they make shots. They don't -- you don't know where this goes, but all I can tell you is if we're in the right mindset and we're ready to go, I'm coaching a team I want to coach.

Q. What do you see out of your team? Have you looked them in the eyes, with so much up-and-down all year, do you see a team that is finally ready?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, I don't know that. But I'll say this, we just have been inconsistent. But most of it has been from total focus, locked in, aggressive play to not being that way. And now all of a sudden another team, you give 'em a chance and they come back and beat you and guys make seven threes who hadn't made it all year and another guy's four shots at the shot clock expires and they bank one and that kind of stuff does happen if you're not locked in ready to get after somebody.

So I think our -- I told 'em downstairs, the inconsistency is what's gotten us. And you know, being a little bit beat up and all that stuff has affected us. But we've overcome that. I just would like to have a full team going into this thing.

Q. How surprising is it to you, given this is one of your more veteran teams to be up-and-down --

JOHN CALIPARI: They haven't been there. This is all new to 'em. I mean, you got a lot of guys that this is the first time they're witnessing or being in a position where, all right, one of you got to step up. Last game, not only did we miss the free throws, no one stepped up. Like, somebody go make three straight baskets. We missed five straight shots.

So that's important. We got the guys. I sent them a text today that went: Why we're capable of doing this. And I went through every player and what they add and what they have been able to do and where -- all of 'em, including the walk-ons. And all that we've been through, there have been personal attacks, the vicious, some of the stuff, they went through a ton. Who is more prepared for us than us going through the toughness, the mental toughness, that you need to overcome some of this stuff.

You know, like I said, we're, we understand the staff. Like, we're going over there tonight. We're going to do everything we can to prepare 'em. I named captains. It's a different way of doing things. You're more of a cheerleader. If you have to really get on a guy, take 'em out. Just take 'em out. You don't -- at times this year we were down to two and the rent was due and we didn't have many guys, and so you're begging guys and you're being aggressive with guys to get 'em over the hump. Not now. Do what you're supposed to do, get it done. You know

what's expected. Go get it done.

Q. Along those lines, Lance is a guy from game to game may or may not play a lot, if at all. He's a captain, though. What does that bring?

JOHN CALIPARI: It's really simple why I did it. Because he is one that everyone listens to, and my thing to him is, when they know a guy is leading and may or may not play, yet he's been the same, they will follow. They will follow. I'm putting this on Jacob because I need him to be more. And when he's more, we're pretty good.

And so now instead of the inward thinking, you're a leader, it's outward thinking. It's about the guys. What do I have to do, how do we got to do this. And I think those two will hold guys accountable. But would got a great group of young people. I'm just telling you. They're, every day I walked in the gym I had fun with 'em. And I want to enjoy this run, and it starts with a very hard game against a really good opponent.

So we're going to focus on one thing, that game. They had to tell me downstairs where it was. I said, Where are we playing? They said, North Carolina. I said, Okay.

And then they had to tell me, Who is in the other two? Who is it? And so to be honest, don't ask me because I don't remember right now.

But the first game and those, that little corner of the world is the only thing I'm worried about. I won't watch TV. I could care what people say because a lot of it is their hope and not their opinion, and so why even -- there's -- this is going to be decided on the basketball court around the country.

Q. Any hesitation about putting Sahvir in there in that situation when he hasn't played for six weeks probably at that point?

JOHN CALIPARI: That's why he's got to practice for three days and he's got to show us what he needs to be. And I said, there's nothing that would make me happier than him to impact a game, and then everybody say, man, if we had this dude all year, what would we have been, because when we struggled, a lot of it was guard play, and we had no, we were, you know, I tried to put Bruiser into the game, and he says, I can't. I can't run with 'em.

Q. I seem to remember you haven't liked your seed in this once or twice. Are you okay with the seed?

JOHN CALIPARI: You know, what I was looking at today more than anything else was what teams would be left out,

you know, because I feel for those coaches and those kids.

So my, that's why I kept calling T.J. over, Who is it that's hanging there? Who is it that's not getting in? You know, I feel bad for Vandy and their team. They played great at the end of the year. I have no idea why they're "NET" was what it was. I have no idea. But I feel bad for them.

But the teams that got in, I mean, there's excitement. You could tell. Everybody's juiced. Everybody's 0-0. All these records mean nothing now. Everybody is 0-0. You take care of what's in front of you. You stay in the moment, you enjoy this together, shut your phones off. You don't need anybody else in our circle. They will want to be in there, oh, they want to tell you how to play. Just don't, shut the phones off, worry about each other.

Q. It seems as though to an untrained eye that the MO now is to try to bully Oscar and get him to retaliate. How do you keep --

JOHN CALIPARI: It isn't. It isn't that. You guys have watched him play all this time. Has he ever done that? So what does that tell you that's happening? Did you see the play where the kid grabbed him and held him? And, no, the one where they pushed two hands in his face when he hit? What do you want him to do?

Now, I know he's 255 pounds. What are they going to do? Foul. Just call a hundred fouls. And they don't. So he finally had enough. And this is the nicest kid ever. But I said, it's hard for me to say, What are you doing? It's hard. I mean, I'm watching it too. He's looking at me. I said I can get thrown out of the gym or keep trying to coach you.

Q. You mentioned Vandy. Eight SEC teams in, including a couple first-year coaches. What do you think about that and the future of the league?

JOHN CALIPARI: No, you got terrific coaches, you got great facilities, you got commitments to basketball that wasn't there. Now all of a sudden you got a bunch of teams that, you know, it wasn't what it was when I walked in here, where there were five or six teams that were practicing at the women's gym. You had, you know, there was, they were flying commercial everywhere, including recruiting. That ain't -- no. We're all on that level and it's great. It's great. It makes it -- I tell you, I've been in leagues where you had to win every game and if you lost one game in your league you were done. Now think about it, eight teams in? Not only eight teams in, eight teams have a chance to win the national title. That's the kind of league you want to be in. I would like more separation for us, but, you know, we're still going to get the best players. That kind of stuff will not change. We got good kids now,

but we got a good group coming in, couple kids coming back. All of a sudden you're looking at it like, okay, let's just keep going. Good for the league though.

Q. I know that you want it for the kids, but it's been awhile since you coached a team that won a game in the NCAA --

JOHN CALIPARI: You know what's disappointing? What disappoints me is three years ago that -- that ain't a hundred years, three -- we could have won the national title. And they cancelled the season. What happened last year, first time in my career. First time in my career. You know what? Hurt like hell. But you move on and you move to the next.

For me this has got to be a ball because they are going to feed off of me. If I have or listen to, you got to win because -- I know you won 9,000 games and been to Final Fours and you got an 80 percent -- but last year you lost, do you feel -- I'm not, I got to, they got to see me saying, he's loose and ready to go. Because they're going to feed off of me. And I'm excited about it. I'm excited for these kids and where they are. And me knowing, individual players, not just one, where they were and what we had to do to keep bringing them along. Now here they are.

I had one of the greatest responses to my tweet or text to the guys. And I read it to 'em and said, Now who sent me that text? And they went around the room and the kid that sent it, there's no way it would have been him. And it was him. And they, one guy went, What? But it shows me the growth of these young people. That's our job. That's what we do here. Getting them prepared for the rest of their life and what they want to do. It's been a good run and a learning experience. You learn. Sometimes when people show you who they are, believe 'em. Believe 'em.

What I would say in all this stuff, that by overcoming this, I told them, There's nothing you're going to go through that will be like this, and you did it. So when anything hits you, you're going to say, Dude, you should have been through the 2023 season, you want to know something.

And again, it's, you know, I get it. We got the greatest fans. They travel, they're into it. No one has the fan base that we have. And the other side of it is, we got the greatest fan base that's really into it and passionate. You got a small portion of 'em that are really aggressive. That's all part of being at Kentucky. But for those players to live through that, great experience for the rest of their lives.

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