

CBS Sports Classic: North Carolina vs Kentucky

Saturday, December 18, 2021

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

T-Mobile Arena

Kentucky Wildcats
Coach John Calipari
Oscar Tshiebwe
Sahvir Wheeler
Press Conference

Kentucky 98, North Carolina 69

Q. There was a point that you had sort of just let out this exclamation, screamed real loud. Although North Carolina wasn't ranked, it's a battle of blue bloods. Was this a statement win for Kentucky? Did you consider this a huge matchup?

SAHVIR WHEELER: You know, Coach Cal going into it, he said just play it like an exhibition. It's December. We're still figuring things out. It's only a big game once you win after. So after the game obviously it's a big win playing against a blue blood, and as players not many people get the opportunity to play against a Duke, a Carolina, and later we play Kansas all in one year.

So I'm just super excited, super grateful to be here and have the opportunity to play against those type of programs. But at the end of the day we just want to come here and win, and we did that.

Q. Sahvir, you talked earlier in the season about being motivated a little bit by some of the doubts that people had when you transferred here. Obviously a lot of that came back after Notre Dame. How much was that in your mind this week, bouncing back from last week's performance?

SAHVIR WHEELER: None of that was in my mind. Everyone is going to have a bad game. It just so happened it was that game and we lost. But I'm a confident kid I hope as many people can tell, and I play for the big lights.



This is why I came here, to play against the best, to be challenged every day in practice by my teammates, by my coaches, and play a tough schedule where we got to play, you got to show up to win, you got to win your matchup.

So this opportunity, I was really looking forward to it no matter who we played, if it was Ohio State or if it was North Carolina, I didn't have any doubt. I was just looking to see what I could have done better and flipped the page and come out and played today.

Q. Sahvir, much was made about Notre Dame leaving you open on the perimeter, trying to take away the drive. Tonight you got to the rim again, again, again. What made the difference, and how much was there a motivation to prove something with that?

SAHVIR WHEELER: No, it was nothing to prove anything. I think the biggest thing was watching film to see what they gave me, and I know my strengths is coming off that elbow area and making jump shots, going right or going left, and Coach Cal was like, man, shoot shots that you know you can make. Don't worry about anything else, just shoot balls, play with confidence.

That's what I did and that's what forced them to make that adjustment. They started going under obviously at the beginning of the game. I made a couple shots in the second half, now they're going over. Now the lane is opened up like the Red Sea, and I was able to get some lay-ups, and create for other guys, as well.

Q. You mentioned looking at film. I think Tennessee got 22 lay-ups against them; tonight you guys had 20 lay-ups and dunks.

SAHVIR WHEELER: That's crazy. That's crazy you say that, because me and my dad watched that Tennessee game this morning. As he was coming to the game in the airport he called me he was like, yo, let's watch this Tennessee game and see how they were able to get into the paint, and we dissected that.

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Q. You talked about it a little bit already, but what did you see there?

SAHVIR WHEELER: Yeah, challenging the bigs' foot speed, especially they play so low and they try to eye side ball screens. There's not many people that can match my foot speed, so once I got downhill with good screens set by our bigs, like Oscar and Lance, I was able to make plays.

Q. The defensive effort today, Cal talked about it earlier in the week, you guys finding your swagger. Is this indicative of what that swagger looks like defensively and offensively?

SAHVIR WHEELER: Yeah, the biggest things were for us Coach Cal always says, we get to 80 points we're going to win most of our games, and if we hold opponents to 60, 62, 65, we're going to win that game.

We did that previous game but we didn't make shots against Notre Dame. We played good defense, yeah, 65 points you're supposed to win that game, especially here in Kentucky. Our big thing was getting back to what we do, getting back to flying, getting back to sharing the ball, getting back to playing for somebody else. You don't have the play, you don't hold the ball.

Just get off of it make a play for somebody else and let someone else make the play. So we just got back to what we were doing for six months in the summer, which was running, playing with speed, playing selfless, and letting the game come to us.

Q. Oscar, you had 12 boards. You guys came in as one of the leading rebound margin teams, I think 16.9 coming into the game. You out-rebound them by 18. When your teammates are getting -- it seemed like there was one sequence I think there was four offensive rebounds in the first half. When your teammates are getting in on the action to sort of help you on the boards, does it make your job easier?

OSCAR TSHIEBWE: Yes, sir. That really making my job easy and it really helps the team. I told them, I said, I want to go out there and grab 20 rebounds if you guys not going for it. (Laughter).

Being able to help with this team is what we're doing right now, so we had a lot of conversation, let's talk, let's go for every rebound. Like I grabbed today 12, Keion was going for rebounds, everybody was going for rebounds, and one of the things I do, if I see my teammates, we jump together, but I see him, he got it, I'm not going for it. Because if I'm trying to fight we might lose it.

So I just play for the team, and I'm enjoying what we're doing right now. They're not just letting me do all the work. Glad they're helping me.

Q. Oscar, how well do you think you guys competed, fought, and all the stuff that you guys were talking about coming into this?

OSCAR TSHIEBWE: I think we did great. We did good. We were a little bit opposite from what happened at Notre Dame, so we went back and we talked. We had 2 for 19 and they still beat us by 2. That's what we figured out. We say, we have a good team, but if we can play basketball, we just go. We miss, go back in defense, defend it, do something else.

I think like we're going to do great, and we have confidence with each other and we are together. That's one thing I love about this team.

Q. How much did this team need a day like today against a marquee opponent? You're on the big stage, and to kind of put all the pieces together and play well like this.

OSCAR TSHIEBWE: We need days like today every single time we step in and play basketball. If we came out like this every single night, every single day, it's going to be so tough for the people we're going to go against. They're going to have nightmare playing against us.

It's going to be good. We're going to go talk. We're not going to back down. We're going to keep getting better and bring the same energy we had today every single night, every single day.

Q. Is there any kind of apprehension that you have given that COVID has kind of popped back up and we're seeing games canceled, and obviously this game wasn't supposed to be your opponent? How do you feel about what you're starting to see as a trend right now?

SAHVIR WHEELER: You know, some of it -- I don't know if we talked about it with everyone, but I know some of us were like, man, this could be our last game for a while, so just go out there and give it your all. Like play your hardest.

At this level you typically only have one game a day, so why not just go balls to the wall, play your hardest, play for your brother, and try to win a game.

Obviously that was some speculation about that, but we haven't been focused on that. We were focused on our

game today and winning the game and getting the job done.

Q. John, leading up to this game, the players were talking about fighting, competing, going after it. How well do you think they did that?

JOHN CALIPARI: They did, but I told them after the game, we added some -- the focus on our offense was a little bit different, how we were going to play. We were going to go back to some of my old-school dribble-drive stuff.

I said, how did he do? And they went, wow, whose fault is that? It's my fault. I'm still figuring this team out.

What we do with Oscar, how we get -- you've got to get to 75 or 80. If you're not getting to 75 or 80, you're not going to go on a run at the end of the year. You're just not.

That means if you're not making threes, what else are you going to do to make baskets? It would be a lot easier if you make threes. Today we were, what, 8 for 15, but we were at the rim, which is what we were trying to do.

Again, I told Hubert after, that's by far the best we've played, and we're still trying to figure it out. Sahvir hasn't been close to that. Maybe the Duke game, but the end of Duke game he turned it over, bad shot, did some things. He played throughout. Kellan made shots; Keion, I took him out. He's held to a high standard here, and it has nothing to do with made baskets. You can go 1 for 5 but go five rebounds, go tip-dunk one, dive on the floor, take a charge, and you stay in the game.

Part of that, they can't judge themselves by what's happening for them offensively because you end up being in the tank half the time because you're only going to make half the shots. The other half you're in the tank.

And it's not just him. We've got a lot of guys that judge their game versus baskets and shots.

Q. I think Tennessee had 22 lay-ups against them. You guys had 20 lay-ups and dunks. Seemed like a big part of today was Sahvir kind of sticking to the plan. Seemed like everything you guys wanted to do.

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, when you go to the dribble-drive you're opening up the court, and that's what happened. It wasn't just him. I mean, we had a bunch of guys get to the lane.

We worked on it for three days, but the problem is -- the good news is most of my time the last days before this was spent on us. Not a whole lot spent on Ohio State.

I got on the plane and figured we may play North Carolina, let me watch two tapes. So on the way out I saw two but did not know that's who we were playing, and I said, I'm going to watch another one because we would have played somebody out here.

I'm glad it was North Carolina. We needed to go against a good team to figure out what we are. Like I watched them against Purdue. Let me tell you something, they had Purdue beat. It was touch and go.

Tennessee got them, but guess what, it was a back-to-back game. It was a follow-up game. Because I said, when did they play this? The next day. Well, okay. And Tennessee got them pretty good.

But they're going to be fine. They've got size. They've got guard play. They didn't make shots today, and what happens is, just like us at Notre Dame, when you go 1 for 13, 2 for 19, you're going to be in the 60s. It's just what you're going to be. And now you've got to hope the other team is as bad as you are.

Q. I had asked Sahvir this about if this was somewhat of a statement game. They came out with a purpose, and at the end he made mention that the guys got together talking that we never know when they're going to look up and say, this may be the last game we're playing. You just got done saying you told Hubert that this was the best game they played. What was it about today that you saw in your team that they came out with such a purpose?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, they had three great days of practice and they were focused. Today we came in and shot around this morning, and it was their choice. Do you guys want to go? They said, yeah, let's go. I said, well, we'll get over there at 9:00 and be done by 9:30. And they came over.

We had a great shoot-around, so they were ready to play. I told them this: Feel good that you're playing. There's all kinds of teams that aren't playing. Feel good that you are playing basketball. We don't know where all this stuff goes, but my hope is that we are able to mitigate, if folks will get the booster we can mitigate.

And then the other thing is if you have eight guys play. Well, I have three starters now. So do I, now let's play. We've got healthy guys that we've got to coach. Let Brad coach the game. I want him to coach anyway. I'll make the other guys be sick and have my son coach.

I mean, we just can't -- look, last year was the most

miserable thing I've ever been through. Forget about -- my whole worry was keeping guys safe. We went a whole lot. Not a player or a staff got a virus. We went a whole year, and so my -- the basketball wasn't very good. We were 8 and 8 in our league, but we weren't very good for us, but I wasn't even worried about basketball.

I don't want to be near that, and if guys are out, let's just keep coaching and playing.

Q. I know you said all your guys were vaccinated earlier in the year. Do you have to start separating guys at this point? How are you going to manage all this moving forward?

JOHN CALIPARI: We're going to talk about it. I'd like them to get boosters. I'm not sure any of them really want to try to go do a booster. I did a booster shot and I did scream, but I did take the shot.

We've just got to do it. But if anybody -- I don't force them. If anybody chooses not to do it, they don't do it. I mean, that's what it is.

But our kids have been good. I mean, they were good last year. Now, we never became a team last year because we were separated. At least this year if we do separate we're okay.

And I said it a year ago. If you were a veteran team that knew each other you could be separated and be fine. If you were all new guys and you couldn't be together, you'd never become a team. You can't trust each other. We never got close.

This team, this is a good group, and I've said it. Everybody was like, well, you know, what if they go out and lose to North Carolina. We lost to Ohio State out here two years ago, but because of how we played, I knew we'd be fine.

This game, I'll be honest with you, I never looked up. I didn't know we were up that much until about three minutes to go. I never -- I couldn't find a scoreboard. I didn't want to embarrass myself like where is the score, so I didn't say it. I just kept coaching.

And then I looked up and I'm like, wow. So if you wonder why I was getting on guys with the score the way it was, because I didn't know what the score was.

Q. You mentioned the three-point shooting and shots not falling for Carolina, but a lot of that was the way you guys defended them. I was wondering what you saw in terms of how you guys were so effective in limiting them from having those open looks.

JOHN CALIPARI: The one that -- well, there are two 4 men, 13 and 45, Manek. They are as good a shooting big men as they are, so we had to say, well, what do you want to give up. You've got to give up something. You pick your poison. We didn't want those two.

Then when we had one late where he got that three off I wanted to kill the guy, because what are you doing.

But we did -- most of the game we did what we needed to do.

The second thing I'll tell you, when their guards dance, they're about to shoot a three, and it goes. Like I've watched enough tape in the last 24 hours to see that shot, deep, deep threes, both he and Jackson can really shoot. That's why they're going to be good. They've got big guys. They can shoot the ball.

The thing that scared me when I watched it, they shoot the ball and sometimes put five shooters on the court. We don't put five shooters on the floor. As a matter of fact, we have shooters, we just didn't have makers for a while. No one would make a shot. We shot it. Just didn't make it.

And so I worried that if they're making shots and we're not, what that would do to this team.

But we never -- I loved our aggressiveness. We were going to press -- one of the questions, the staff said to me, why would we press, they're going to run anyway, and I'm like, because we're going to get into their legs.

This is how we play, so we're going to play the way we play. If it's not good enough, we'll learn.

Q. Do you feel like this was the response you were looking for in terms of the team finding the swagger that you wanted or at least a foundation for it?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, the biggest thing I did prior to the game individually and then in front of the team was Sahvir, lead us. It's not based on how you're playing, Sahvir. Lead us. If you're playing great, lead us and get everybody involved. If you're not making shots or you're a little confused, lead us. Lead. That's what he did today.

There was only one play that he tried to get another basket, and I looked at him, and he knew, I gotcha, I gotcha. He could have passed it to somebody.

But when he does that, and Oscar -- I didn't see Oscar's final numbers. Just 16 and 12. And he didn't play, what -- I did, I told him after, it's nice we know we can play without

him know. Again, we've got to play a little different, but we can play without him.

We've got good players, really good, who are good kids. Who are good kids. We've got some stuff going on tomorrow. We're not going to get in until late. One of the things we're going to do with the kids -- I don't know if you know, I had invited Mookie Betts to the game today, and the reason I invited him to the game was my cousin, TJ Friedl, was moved up to the Reds, and his first hit was a home run. In the majors. Against the Dodgers. What did Mookie do? Went and got the ball and told him, I'm going to give you a bat, give me that ball, and then presented it to TJ.

Now, what is Mookie Betts going to get from that? Like why would -- you know what that tells me? He's got a good heart, and he's got a good heart for people. He was getting nothing in return. You know, TJ went up and TJ was here tonight, too, and I got those together, their families and wives.

But I told the team the story because like we're going through in western Kentucky right now some miserable stuff, and there's shoes -- I tell everybody in western Kentucky there's 10,000 shoes coming tomorrow. We've got 11 families tomorrow later in the day that we're going to do Christmas for.

I want these kids to do stuff where they get nothing in return, to understand what true joy is.

Now, this would have been a hard deal tomorrow if North Carolina would have beat our brains in, but we were able to get out of the gym alive, go back, and even though it makes no difference, it kind of does.

Probably shouldn't do this, but I'll tell you, we're going to -- tomorrow morning, Mitch, myself, Darius Miller and Jack Givens are going to go to western Kentucky in the morning as these shoes are being delivered, Samaritan's Feet. So we're going to go early in the morning, and I believe Manny set it up and FEMA and the governor and all that, to just be there.

I wasn't going to announce anything. We were just showing up. But we're all of us -- and I think Mitch is going to have Kevin Saal from Murray State and his son, Scott, going to meet us there.

So we just want people to know we care and we know, and it's not going away.

I want my kids to feel it. With all that's going on, I just don't want to take the kids down there with the COVID and

everything.

Anyway, thank you.

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