

CBS Sports Classic: Kentucky vs. North Carolina

Saturday, December 16, 2023

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

State Farm Arena

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach John Calipari

Tre Mitchell

Rob Dillingham

Press Conference

Kentucky 87, North Carolina 83

Q. Rob, you're a North Carolina kid. Was this game personal to you?

ROB DILLINGHAM: I mean, a little bit. My dad always wanted me to go to Carolina. I mean, I take every game personal, so I just look at it as another game for us, but I'm happy we got the W.

Q. (Indiscernible) team is down to the wire?

ROB DILLINGHAM: I feel like it's crazy for real because we ain't really have experience playing older dudes and playing in games like that, so you definitely see mistakes within some of us, especially me. I make like freshman mistakes.

But I feel like playing in games like that help us grow and learn from past games to perform better in the next ones.

Q. Tre, last time you guys were on a stage like this, one of these classics, you were against Kansas and you guys didn't finish. How have you seen these young guys grow around you and to watch this game finish the way it did tonight?

TRE MITCHELL: I mean, they made plays down the stretch, big baskets down the stretch. They were willing to step up and take a play, as opposed to against Kansas, you see that we learned from that, and now that they're gaining some experience, a game like this comes down to the wire, you see the fire in dudes and they're ready to go



get it.

Q. When it gets within two or three, what is Coach Cal saying to you guys in the huddle?

ROB DILLINGHAM: He really just says lock in on defense, they're disciplined, there's a lot of times where we'll close out and think they're not going to shoot it and then we'll play with our hands down and they end up hitting a three. Really just little stuff and not giving up easy baskets where we could have prevented it.

Q. Tre, what's the change with Aaron Bradshaw back?

TRE MITCHELL: I would say that there's a lot more switching going on. I'm able to get out there and guard a smaller defender, keep him on the perimeter, stay in front of him kind of thing as opposed to having a battle with a 5 for 40 minutes.

It's great to have him back. You see the impact he has on the court, and it really gives us all a lot more freedom out there.

Q. Rob, what was your mindset when the game was getting close to closing it out?

ROB DILLINGHAM: I just look at it as like I want to win the game, so I started to (indiscernible) 2 of 10, turnover, so like Coach Cal talked to me and made me realized I've got to slow down and trust myself and have confidence, so the second half I didn't think about what I was doing in the first half, and I just wanted to win, so I just tried to make winning plays.

Q. When you were up by three, Carolina had the ball, were you looking to just play it out or was it to foul? I know they turned the ball over.

TRE MITCHELL: We discussed it in the huddle, and you've got to give credit to Coach Cal on that one. He trusted us in the moment. He asked us what we wanted to do. We said we just wanted to guard straight up, switch 1 through 5 and make them make a tough shot.

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Q. Rob, (indiscernible) really kind of let him know do you feel that you have that?

ROB DILLINGHAM: Yeah, for sure. I feel like since Canada to now, our relationship grew so much. He still shows me that he has confidence in me. He still lets me rock, but at the same time, he wants me to be more pro and make smarter decisions and stuff.

Really I'm just thankful for having him, and he helps me while letting me be me.

Q. You had eight guys score at least seven points or more. What does that balance say about the trust you have in each other?

TRE MITCHELL: I mean, I've seen it all season, we've got four, five, six dudes in double figures multiple games this year. It comes down we know the dude to the left and to the right of us is an elite basketball player. It makes the game so much easier for each one of us when each individual person is capable of drawing so much attention. It just opens up shots for everybody else.

Q. Tre, you've been in March Madness situations. Less on the line tonight, but did it feel that way?

TRE MITCHELL: Oh, yeah, yeah. It felt like we were about to go on a deep run. You felt the crowd's energy. You felt the intensity out there.

But I think that being able to feel that intensity from these guys this early, it speaks volumes of their character and how much they want to win.

Q. How impressive was it to see the way Adou came off the bench?

TRE MITCHELL: Man, yo, that dude, yeah, that's why at the end of the game I hugged him, because he accepted whatever Cal said and he came in there and made an immediate impact. He lifted us off the floor. The energy that he brought and the plays that he made, it's second to none, just to be able to adjust to that switch-up he had, and then he still gave it his all every second he was out there.

Q. Rob, the trust that you guys had in Aaron at the line, he went the first time, missed the front end of a one on one, but you guys seemed to have (indiscernible). What do you think that shows(indiscernible)?

ROB DILLINGHAM: I feel like Aaron is a basketball player. He wants to win also. It shows an example when I missed

the lay-up at the end he gets a rebound, puts it back in the clutch. He just makes plays. He hits threes. He can stretch the floor. He can dunk the ball. He can rebound the ball.

He started us off, and that's why we got off to a good start, and I feel like Aaron is a great player for sure.

Q. Coach, did you say anything or find out anything different about your team that you hadn't seen in a game yet?

JOHN CALIPARI: How about Ugonna? He just started practicing. He got the flu and could not travel with us. Flew in this morning, went to the shootaround, had to do what? Went in the bathroom. I can't play him. He said, I'm going to be fine.

He helped us. Aaron gets a fourth foul, I've got to play him.

I'm happy about him.

But the plays he makes, DJ makes, Antonio makes, the rebounds, the stuff that he was doing, the free throw miss, but they balled.

I'm telling you, that is a veteran team that came in with one idea: they were going to be physical with us. That's what they did. You know what, we held our own.

This is a group of young talented basketball players that are still learning. We're not near where we should be or where we will be, but I'm kind of liking where we are at this stage of the season. But now it's time to say, okay, let's go.

A really smart team, too. Like really smart.

Q. Rob, what was your perspective of that play at the end? You guys were up three. Looked like he was trying to foul you in the backcourt, I think about 12 seconds left. Can you take us through that?

ROB DILLINGHAM: When I was dribbling at the end? If they had got close I was going to call a time-out because Coach told me we had two time-outs, so I was just waiting it out, seeing if they was going to trap, but I felt like we could get it up the court, so I was trying to waste as much time as we could and get it to a good ball handler, you see Reed make a good pass.

JOHN CALIPARI: The play for Robert is where we space the court and they switched, and he had a guy on him, and we just said, take him, and he did, and he got fouled. Did you get fouled on that play?

TRE MITCHELL: Yeah, he got fouled for sure.

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't think he got fouled.

Q. Cal, you said you like where this team is right now. Are they ahead of where you thought they would be coming into the season?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, we didn't know -- look, you know what's amazing? We had a big guy, and everybody thought we were going to walk it up the court somebody told me. I'm like, what are you talking about? This is who we are because we've got all -- but again, to try to -- no. This is who we are.

Now we've got a 5 guy that can play like he's a 3 or a 4, so you play the same way.

I thought Adou did some really good stuff today. Again, this was a game you had to fight. You had to be a dog or you were getting chomped on. We were able to hold our own, make a couple shots. Davis made some plays down the stretch that kept him there and gave them their chance.

But we've got a lot of stuff we've got to do. We do. Like I said, I'm giving them today off and tomorrow off, so they'll have two days off, and then we'll go Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday to get ready for a game on Thursday.

Q. With Rob, I'm sure he does some things where you want to pull your hair out --

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, he does. All right, so you're coaching a kid that can create space and get a basket when he wants to. Do you clip his wings? You can't. You've got to let him go. But I give him two a half. The third one you're coming out. You're not going nuts. This isn't the and-one tape.

For you older people in here, you know what I mean, and-one. When I tell them that, they have no idea what I'm talking about. But this isn't the and-one tape where you got to do five extra things and then pass it.

You saw the one where he drove it, threw it that way to Aaron. Thank God they tipped it out of bounds. Why did you do that? Because I do that sometimes.

But I've got to let some of that stuff go. Same with DJ. I mean, he's so aggressive, he got to create contact and score. He's trying to create space, and that means they're coming. But that's all doable.

I thought Justin was better today. He's just got to get in a

rhythm. We played him on the other side of the court so he could get to his left hand a little bit better and if he goes baseline pull up on his right, which he can do. He hit a couple big shots, got some rebounds.

But what happened was No. 3, he went under the screen three different times and the kid got three threes. Then you can't be in the game. I'm not mad at you. I love you. Do you want to stay with me tonight at my house? Come on, I'll make you a pizza. But you can't be in the game right now, and he understood that.

Q. Tre was really praising Adou saying the second he steps on the floor he's this huge lift for you guys.

JOHN CALIPARI: His dad played for me, and Jeremy Hunt and Joey Dorsey were at my room last night from Memphis. Jeremy Hunt said to me, I can't believe how much better he's gotten. I can't believe -- now, here's the issue. He wants to be the point guard. But his dad is 6'9" and built like him, probably bigger shoulders, so he's probably still growing. I doubt if you're going to be a point guard.

But the way he's playing right now, he's got one thing he's got to improve. You know how you do that? You live in the gym. You can do that. They wanted to say Maxie couldn't shoot. Yeah, that's true. That wanted to say Cason wasn't that good a shooter. Yeah, he leads the NBA. I've heard it all. You live in the gym, he can improve. The guy is going to make it.

The guy I worried about and he was smiling after the game and I loved it was Jordan Burks. I've been playing Jordan as a 3, which he loves because he was playing 4-5 because we were shorthanded and that's not who he is.

But I said, stay with it, man, you're going to get a chance and you're going to bust through, but I didn't play him, and he was fine. He smiled -- now, I expect him to be a little bit upset because he's a competitor who wants to play. But he was happy we won, and it shows what he is.

You guys saw what he did at a store. He bought the lady in front of him stuff. This kid, tomorrow we have 10 families that go to the lodge where the kids live and we have Christmas for 10 families, and part of it is they -- from gifts to big screen TVs to food to rent checks to -- these kids get to do it and feel that, what it's about.

Again, really smart, good-hearted kids that are willing to share that like each other, that genuinely like each other. What did we need early? Size. Now we've got a little bit. So I think we'll be fine.

Q. Tre said that he put the decision into the players' hands whether to foul or not with five seconds remaining in the game. What went behind that decision to allow the guys --

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, I got in the huddle and I just said, there's 11 seconds to go. Do you want to foul when they get to half court? Naturally they said, no, that we're going to switch. Then I saw Cadeau in the game, and I told Reed, when he crosses half court, foul him, so that it doesn't even go to Davis.

But he just said, I decided not to. Okay.

Q. Do you recall other players from your past that you would let play through mistakes the way you let Rob?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah. I had this kid named Dajuan Wagner who on defense I turned my back and looked at the coaches, how's it going down there, and then I turned, we're on offense, and I said, score that ball, kid, score that ball.

So yes, I have done it.

I looked at our North Carolina game two years ago. We played just like we're playing right now. You would have thought we were playing 1950 basketball. We played exactly how we played today. Now, we got injured that year at the end, but I had a good team, and we could play that way.

There are times that you don't -- like there are teams out there taking 18 to 20 threes. Do you know why? They don't shoot it real good, and at the two-point line they're 54, 55 percent, it's better them shooting more twos. That's how this is.

I have a team that should shoot threes, that you can space the court. I've done this 19 years now. You play to your team. I don't have a system. I'm playing to win as many games as I can and put these kids in the best position for them to play well and know that we've got their back.

Q. I looked in the middle of the second half, kind of looked like the Kansas offense got stagnant but Tre hit shots and Rob got going. Is this team getting more comfortable in those situations --

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah. When you've got 19 year olds that stuff happens.

Q. What's been the trick to getting them more comfortable over the last few weeks?

JOHN CALIPARI: You've got to execute better and create a shot for your teammate.

Now, the end of the game you can space it and do what we did because you're running clock down. You're not doing that early. We moved the ball. We did. We took some -- Antonio took a floater from 12 feet. What would you do that for? Like that's the stuff -- like come on, we've got to be better.

Robert had a guy on him. He could have drove for a lay-up. Why did you do that? It's stuff we'll learn.

But I thought defensively we did some good things. Davis is really good. Let me say this: UNC is a Final Four level team. They are. And Davis -- I'm like, you're one of the best players in the country right now, three-level scorer, lay-up, mid-range, and three.

Now all of a sudden No. 3 comes in, hadn't been making shots, but naturally against us he makes every shot, and now you still have the other big guys -- they're good. They're good.

Cadeau, he's good. They're a good team. We were lucky to win, but I'm happy for this young group because they've really worked hard. They've sacrificed for each other.

You want them to feel that. But I'll tell you, on CBS, on national television, to make the plays they made at the end to win the game shows you what they are because it wasn't plays. This was space the court, go take the guy.

Q. If Carolina is Final Four level, what does that say about your team?

JOHN CALIPARI: The upside of this team is really up, but let's see if we can get there. Let's see. We still have one more big guy to get. We get him eligible, now we've got three seven-footers -- I'm sorry, 7'2", 7'2", seven-foot. It just looks different. It just does.

We were playing with 6'7", 6'9". Now all of a sudden you've got a 6'9" and a 7'2". A little different for us. It doesn't change how we're playing. It doesn't change what we're doing. We're still trying to make 25 to 30 threes. Why that many? Because we can make them. Why would you only take 20? Because we don't make them. You've got one or two guys that can make them. The other guys are 25 percent. I don't want them shooting.

This team -- it tells you, the game is going to this. You'd better have a bunch of shooters. The kids that we've recruited, even the big kids, you've got to be able to make shots, too.

