

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Arkansas vs Kansas

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Providence, Rhode Island, USA

Amica Mutual Pavilion

Arkansas Razorbacks Coach John Calipari

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, Coach.

Q. Did you get a haircut?

JOHN CALIPARI: I did. Does it look good?

Q. You mentioned Boogie is back in practice. His hand was bothering him a little bit so he went light, but, you know, I'm trying to think of the rotation. Like, how am I going to do this? It was a great story when he came and said, look, I'm going to be able to go, but I don't want to hurt the team. They're doing some good stuff. And I said, but if I can help this, I said, yeah, you can help us, we only have seven guys. Now it's how we rotate this and how we slide him in is going to be really important. I'm just telling him, just go be you. If they go, they go. If they don't, they don't. Do some of the stuff you did before you went down.

Q. And you and Bill have coached against each other quite a bit, twice in the NCAA Tournament championship games. Have you reflected on those games at all since the match-up was announced?

JOHN CALIPARI: I have been so locked in to what I have to do for this group that I haven't. I kind of predicted it. I predicted to my team in practice, here's what they're going to do to us... should I say it that way? The team is like how? Because I've done this. But playing someone I have respect for in this is hard. Both of us are trying to beat each other's brains in. Then you feel bad and then you move on thinking about the next game.

No, they're good, they're big. They struggled some, so have we, but he's a great coach, has built terrific programs and cultures that win. So it will be a hard game for us, a really hard game.

Q. You have been doing this for a long time. There have been a lot of changes in college basketball. I'm wondering, do you enjoy it as much now as opposed to when you started? And also, do you think it's better or worse for the players the way things are now?

JOHN CALIPARI: I'm kind of back to the roots of being the underdog. Some of you weren't alive, but I'm back to the roots of the underdog. If you remember in '96, we played here, we played at Atlanta and then at the Meadowlands. I don't know if he's in here, who walked me to the presser is, I said, I grabbed him in the hallway. This was one of those years that was so rewarding thinking about not this, all I'm thinking about is where we were, threw us in the coffin, forgot the nails. We bust out somehow. 0-5 and 1-6 in two road games you have to play. No chance of the NCAA Tournament and all of a sudden, we're here.

I have had real fun with this team, mainly because they're great guys. We had to play without our two leading scorers for three or four weeks. That's... you're done. They got both of their leading scorers out, they're done. This team found a way that became one heartbeat and that was so enjoyable and rewarding for me. Now you go from this thing while you're in it trying to figure out next year's team. That's different. You don't get a chance to relax or enjoy or nothing. You're moving on to the next thing, that makes a difference if you're about the kids, it's the same. To me it's the same. I got the same job.

Q. But you get them for one year and then they're gone.

JOHN CALIPARI: You know my career, right? That's what I've been. Some of the other guys, now, let me say, our league, you had teams that started five seniors. Like, we were the youngest team in the SEC. But you had teams that retained and retained, which is going to get harder and harder to do, but they had, and one team had a couple grad students and seniors. I'm not begrudging them. They're really good, but it's going to start where everybody, it's going to be hard to retain and whatever is next we'll just try to be first.

Q. I guess what I'm asking is do you enjoy the job as much as you enjoy the job it was when you started?

JOHN CALIPARI: Well, when I started, I had no basement to go back to. Every game seemed to be life and death. I remember sitting in the locker room and saying how did Coach Smith do this for 30 years? I'm in the locker room not knowing if we can win or lose. Then we got good and other games, I knew we were winning. Done. It was the other ten, do you split them, do you win them? What is it? Now I'm back to win or lose any game we played. That means literally all year.

We played ten NCAA Tournament teams and I believe five or six of them in our pre-season games, our exhibition names, whatever you call them, so, no, it's different. The name, image, and likeness is all different. The kids all being free agents, guys, 15 years I had to retool teams every year, maybe have one or two back, maybe have none back. Started five freshmen in, what was that, '15 or '16? '15, I think, five freshman and we were in this tournament. Could you do that now? No way. There's no possible way. But back then you could do it.

So now I'm having to get a little more veteran, but I'm not going to stop recruiting young kids because it's what moves me, being able to help families and help -- it's what moves me. I'm not going to change that. I just have to have a few beasts that have beards and kids in the stands, I don't know.

Q. When you saw the pod --

JOHN CALIPARI: You weren't gray when we used to work together, but go ahead.

Q. Thank you. When you saw the pod come out and you see. This building you have history. Bill Self you have history. Kansas you have history. Rick you have history. Did you kind of pause for a moment and just appreciate this is almost your life pod?

JOHN CALIPARI: Do you want me to tell you exactly? It came down to the last four teams and we weren't in yet. I'm like, could they possibly do that when four teams that got in were below us in the SEC? They can't do it. Can they do it? And we got in. Then I started breathing. I still haven't thought of all the other stuff you talked about. We have a hard game, a hard game tomorrow. Hard game. I just want to be at my best where I'm helping these kids for 40 minutes. I do everything I can to help them. This year I have had to do this a lot (biting hand). You have seven guys. They throw it away, I had one guy have seven turnovers in a game and I told him you're doing fine (biting hand). I mean, so, no, I haven't.

We're forgetting about Omaha. They've had a heck of a year. They deserve to be in this conversation, too.

Q. Hi, John. Just a reaction when you heard that Providence was going to be the place that you play in first and second round.

JOHN CALIPARI: Italian city. We already went out to Federal Hill, went under The Pineapple. Let's go. Had a nice meal last night. Like I said, last time we came here it was a lot of fun. 4-0, we weren't able to go, I tried to tell the guys, you know, but it's... no, I love Providence. I do. It's been one of those places.

By the way, their practice facility at Providence? Oh, my gosh. Like, wait a minute. I remember they practiced in that old building. They really have done some good stuff there.

Q. Question on Thiero. He's been doubtful, any chance he plays tomorrow?

JOHN CALIPARI: Yeah, he won't play tomorrow.

Q. When you have gone through that, if you don't know who's going to be playing and this team has gotten here, why has this group fought through a lot?

JOHN CALIPARI: Really, really good kids, starting with D.J. He's a culture builder. Billy Richmond is opposite. He couldn't care less and that's how he plays and I'm happy. I have to deal with his turnovers. Carter is better, Jonas is healthy TB is taking advantage of his opportunity. One guy's misery is another guy's opportunity. Now we need Z to play. Nelly, everybody wrote him off and now Nelly is playing well. It took some time, but so what. We came together, I walked in and I said I would like to see the team before the press conference and I went in and there was no team. So we had to piece a team together and do this and that, means you better have good guys. Whether it be recruiting or this transfer portal, it's really important for us that they're good people because it doesn't always go like this. Sometimes it goes like that and the only way you can dig out is if you have good people.

THE MODERATOR: Time for two more.

Q. Coach, you started your season against KU, at least unofficially. When you look at this Kansas team, do you see much difference compared to the start of the season?

JOHN CALIPARI: They didn't have Dickinson. We didn't have Jonas. We were centered around Boogie. They were still trying to figure out stuff and it was, you know. I'm glad they were doing it. It was a full out, we made money for charity but no, it has no bearing on this game.

Q. What are some things you have to do well to slow down Kansas?

JOHN CALIPARI: Their two big guys are really as good as it gets in college basketball. One is the leader scorer of any player in college basketball. He's the leader scorer. AJ just does stuff. He can do this and do this and he can do this. Their guards understand what they're supposed to do and how they play. I know they struggled some, so have we. I also know Bill will get his team right and they're going to come into this game and play their best. My hope is we're who we are and we can play our best. It's the time of year you're playing. It'll be a hard game.

Q. John, when you said that you predicted it and told your team, is that about Kansas or about St. John's possibly in the second round?

JOHN CALIPARI: Both. Not that they would be the two. I said they would be the two, if we come out ten, they told me who the sevens were. I said we'll play Kansas. And if we're the two, it'll be him. I thought it may be played somewhere else.

Q. Still worth buying a lottery ticket probably?

JOHN CALIPARI: Where do you think I thought they would put us to play?

Q. Lexington.

JOHN CALIPARI: Come on. And they didn't? When I saw we weren't there, I'm like, wow, somebody must have been sick and went to the bathroom or something for them not the put us there but, look, this is so different from me in that fighting to get in it, the rewards of this.

Let me say one other thing. Every one of these players was in a dark point at one point or another. Really dark place. Questioning can I play, questioning everything. Every one of my players and I just, the first battle you have is with yourself. Don't worry about the others, worry about you and the first battle is that. We have gone through so much. I see kids smiling. Some of the guys I'm like, I just love to see your smile. For three weeks, you had your head down and trying to say you're fine.

I also told them you're never going to disappoint me. Not the way you are as a person and how hard you're working and what you are. I'm never going to be disappointed. Just go play. We still have some guys who miss two, will miss three more. So they haven't quite broken through that. But we've got guys like Billy Richmond. He just plays. If he makes mistakes, my fault, my fault. Enough

"my faults" but he just plays. He plays hard. For me as a coach and me telling him this experience of being in a dark place and overcoming it not someone else, you overcame it is going to be with you for the rest of your life and when you're in a dark place you know you can bust out of it.

We have had those life lessons with this group. It's been rewarding. It will be really rewarding if we play well tomorrow, and playing well does not guarantee we'll win the game because they're really good, too. Thanks.

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