

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oakland vs Kentucky

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach John Calipari

Tre Mitchell

Antonio Reeves

Media Conference



man. You know, young guys, but unbelievably talented, and like Coach said, they have grown so much over the course of this season. And it's March, you know. It's March. You see what some teams are capable of doing. Obviously, it's not the desired outcome, but you gotta live with what reality is for us, but I've enjoyed every single second of being at Kentucky. I got an opportunity to live out a dream, and I've built bonds with people that will last a lifetime.

Q. For either of you guys, when Gohlke kept hitting those threes, you know, a lot of times with hands in his face and so forth, how demoralizing was that for you and is it hard to then focus on what you're trying to do when he keeps knocking down those threes?

ANTONIO REEVES: Yeah, he's a good shooter. He kept shooting the ball. You know he missed a couple but he made a lot of them, and he made some really tough shots down the stretch that. You know, we was in his face and it was kind of, you know, one of those things where, you know, it's March, like Tre said, and they're going to hit some tough shots at the end and we just gotta keep playing.

Q. Tre, how does this experience, you're with a blue blood, you're a high seed but you fall in upset compare to last year, similar situation but not as much a blue blood, not as much of a favorite situation with West Virginia?

TRE MITCHELL: Can you repeat that<.

Q. How does this situation of losing this game with Kentucky compare to when you were with the Mountaineers last year in the tournament and losing that game? You believed you should win but it was more of an even match-up where you weren't the heavy favorite going in?

TRE MITCHELL: This time around, last year I was in tears, I was bumming. This time it's like I have so many emotions going on that I can't feel them. I'm just kind of numb right now, and I'm sure it'll hit me, but this one hurts a lot. You know, it hurts. It's obviously not the desired

Oakland - 80, Kentucky - 76.

JOHN CALIPARI: Let me, first of all, tell you Oakland played a heck of a game. They made some unbelievable shots. We were basically in a box and one late. You know, you go through this, and I've been in the ups and downs of this sport, but this one I'm really hurting for them, because there's other years your team, you max out and you lose a game and you're like, geez. This team, I really felt, could have done so much more and our fans were here again. I just -- I feel bad for our fans. Wish we would have played a little bit better, but it's hard when I look at this and I go, this season these guys got so much better, were so good to each other, celebrated. To define their season and our season with this game, it's the sport we're in. It's the, you know, it's what we do. But that's what I'm disappointed for them, because they -- they deserve this. The preparation, I thought they were great. I thought the spirit was great. I thought we tried to keep it light, but this is -- this tournament, this kind of stuff. But this one hit me hard for them, because again, I just thought I had a team that could do some stuff.

MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Tre, I know it's difficult so soon after a loss, but when you reflect back on this season, what did it mean to you and what was it like to go through this experience with this group of guys as well?

TRE MITCHELL: It was an unbelievable opportunity for me. You know, to get experience under Coach Cal, pick his mind a little bit as far as how he sees the game and the players that he's been around. And special group of guys,



outcome, and you're on the headlines of a Cinderella story when you know that we had the potential to make a really deep run in this thing.

Q. For Tre and Antonio, just talk about what this team meant to you. It seemed like you had a really special bond.

ANTONIO REEVES: Yeah, we had a really special bond. Everybody connected. Everybody stayed together. We went out together. We played the game together. We did everything together, and you know these bonds are going to last a lifetime and it's going to be one of those things where, you know, I could just pick up the phone, I could call one of them, you know, those type of deals. So it's definitely devastating, but you just gotta keep your head up.

TRE MITCHELL: I mean, I loved every single second of it. I love these dudes, and I loved seeing them grow through the time that we had together. Like Antonio said, these are bonds that will last a lifetime. If I run into these dudes down the road, whether you stop talking now, I feel like no matter how much time goes by between when you're talking to somebody on this team, when you see them it's going to be like there was no time apart. And I really did enjoy it thoroughly, just laughing, joking, competing with these guys every single day. It really was a blessing.

Q. John, you said many times that this team was built for March. What went wrong tonight to kind of go away from your belief in the team? What happened tonight to go away from what you thought this team could be?

JOHN CALIPARI: We made some critical mistakes at critical times again today. I mean we had our chances. As good as they played and as many shots as they made, we still had our chances. And both on defense and offense. And when you have a really young team and you look at where did the mistakes come from, they were freshmen.

They had performed on the road in hostile environments that I didn't expect some of the stuff today. But they have gotten so much better in what they're doing. They never stopped. They fought. We just made some errors.

I come back to this one hurt because they are the kind of team you love coaching, and you know, I wanted them to advance because of all that they've been through, and I wanted them to have a chance to relish and cherish this event.

I've been through it 20 some times. My teams have done really well. We've lost a couple of these now. But them,

this is their time. We're better than we played, but you gotta give Oakland credit. I mean, they -- they out rebounded -- they got 16 offensive rebounds. Come on. One of them was late! Come on! I mean, we've had that issue, but -- you know, there was some break-down stuff, but you know, we had our chances.

Q. John, as you mentioned, you've lost a couple of these now. Were there any similarities to this game and that game? And, also, I know you did things to try to -- you wanted them to play loose, you did things like taking them bowling and that sort of thing, but they looked like they played tight. Did you feel they played tight?

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't know. You'd have to ask them, but I thought they were anxious, and when you're anxious, you get really tired really fast. So we had a couple guys that started the game and were exhausted within a minute and a half, two minutes. So I think they were a little anxious.

But I'll tell you, at halftime, you know, we're down a bucket and these guys are in there, and you know, we make our run and you think, okay, we got this, and, you know, there were three -- we miss a dunk. We miss a lay-up. We miss another play and all of a sudden it becomes anybody's ballgame, and they were playing with house money and they made shots and we didn't.

You'd have to ask them. I mean, we did nothing -- like even me during the game, you have to admit, like I wasn't saying anything to the officials. I was just trying to encourage, and we can do this, and you know, trying to push some buttons to get the right combinations out there. But they're freshmen! We don't know how they're going to respond in this stuff.

No, we were beat up that game. I mean, Kellan, if he didn't have the plantar fasciitis. We were a beat-up team tight. Had a high ankle sprain. And we still had our chances to win and we messed around and lost. But this was the full roster. I thought Aaron played well. I thought he did some good stuff. But we weren't quite tough enough to get some of those balls and some of the baskets they scored around the goal.

I just come back to, you know, it's just -- I hate it for these guys that people try to define this season by that game, and it's natural and it's how this business works, but this group was a ball to coach, and, you know, we did things to help them and bring them together, and they did it for each other. They've got great hearts, and that's what's devastating about this for me.

I've lost tough games before, and we've won some really buzzer-beater games. I mean, I've been through everything in my career. So -- but this is one that's like, man!

Q. John, it seems to be pretty well agreed upon that this was a very connected team. Is it possible for teams to sometimes care too much about each other, because there were a lot of the big mistakes that were made through the course of this season on late plays were over-help, over-commitment to try to help a teammate. Is that logical?

JOHN CALIPARI: Some of it was on offense, just why did you do that? And they're not machines and they're not robots, and, you know, you -- they need the experience of some of this stuff so when you're in this environment you can do it, and I thought we went through every experience I could talk about. We were losing more than one game for 36 minutes and came back and won the game. So we did that a couple times.

But maybe over-help, maybe -- sometimes I think they were -- they are so talented that they would try to take over a game themselves. That's more offensively, or doing what you're saying, Mike, just leave. Why did you do that? You know, I'm going to go make a play defensively. Well, no! Or I'm going to make the play offensively so I'm going to take the next three shots. Okay. You missed three now. Now we have an issue. Now we're down five. And so sometimes when you're that talented, you're like, okay, let me take this over.

The good news is I thought that was something that would play good for us where we could get separation from people. But in this kind of game, it kind of hurt us.

Q. Cal, you talked about a lot of player mistakes. What is something that you feel like you could have or should have done --

JOHN CALIPARI: I tried to call a timeout and I should have been quicker to the trigger on the pass across court. I was yelling timeout, but I got this late and I knew. I saw the court and I went timeout, timeout and he let go of the ball. So I could have done that.

I think maybe more box and one earlier. Now, he scored -- we fouled him once and he scored a three even when we were in that. But I think we could have gone earlier to that. But hindsight when you're coaching, if you did something and we had won this game you're a genius and if you don't do it, you know, you're the bad guy and all that stuff.

Like I said, I thought the preparation was what it needed to

be, because you cannot in this tournament come in and start changing. You change everything, now they get tight. Now they think too much versus just play. So we made some gist adjustments to what we were doing offensively. We're one of the best zone teams in the country, to be honest with you, and we missed a bunch of shots today.

Q. John, what kind of an impact does a game like this have in St. Peters a couple years ago just on your philosophy moving forward? Does that mean different scheduling approaches? Does that mean different roster approaches in terms of veterans?

JOHN CALIPARI: It's a good question. Like, I've done this with young teams my whole career, and it's going to be hard for me to change that, because we've helped so many young people and their families that I don't see myself just saying, okay, we're not going to recruit freshmen. I mean, the thing that we've been blessed with is families bring their sons to us and we do what we're supposed to do to help them prepare for the rest of their lives.

But I've taken some older guys, and we've done it. I like what we were doing offensively. How do we get tougher? How do we get more physical? My teams defensively in rebounding have all been better than this, but we've never been like this offensively. I kind of like coaching the way I did this year.

So we've gotta figure out who's coming back and who's not. We got this transfer stuff going on. We may not need it. We have an unbelievable group coming in that I feel really good about. We add some guys and they stay. I mean, you know -- I'm going to -- I'll meet with them tonight. I talked to them after. But I'm going to meet with them in my room tonight, and these guys took this really hard. I mean, they took it really hard. I mean they're -- and I took it hard.

I'll say it again. I feel bad for our fans who all traveled again. They're here. These kids -- they know they're playing for these fans and our fans, who are the best in the country. They travel; they're everywhere. And I imagine they're hurting like we are hurting. So I'll look at other ways that we can do stuff, but, you know, there's -- this thing here, it's a different animal. We've been able to help so many kids and win so many games and Final Fours, national titles and all this stuff, win league championships with young guys. It's changed on us. All of a sudden it's gotten really old. So we're playing teams that our average age is 19. Their average age is 24 and 25. So do I change because of that? Maybe add a couple older guys to supplement. But that's what these two did. And if Tre doesn't get hurt, it's a little bit different, but -- thank you.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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