

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday March 11, 2018

John Calipari
Wenyen Gabriel
Shae Gilgeous-
Alexander
Kevin Knox

Kentucky

Kentucky - 77, Tennessee - 72

JOHN CALIPARI: We got up 17, and then we gave up three threes to Schofield. Told them at halftime it's good because this is what's going to happen in the next tournament, something like this. Now let's figure out what we're about. And I said, and they're not done.

So they start the second half and make another run at us, and I've got to call a time-out right before the 16-minute mark, and this team responded. They responded.

Every situation and experience is new to them, so you don't really know what they're going to do, and we need as many of these kinds of things as we can going into next weekend. So proud of them. Really proud of them.

How about Sacha? Look, P.J. and Sacha and even Quade -- Quade did some good stuff today. But Sacha just had to wait his turn, and he was ready for it. Big play; that stick back was huge.

Q. For Kevin and Wenyen, just what has Shai meant to this team the last few weeks?

KEVIN KNOX: Shai has the ball in his hands a lot during the game, and he's really grown over the year and be able to get his points and get other people involved. I think right now he's playing his best basketball because he's one of our leaders. He knows he's getting better with the decision-making.

Late in the game, he made some huge plays, knocked down some free throws, and found people. He's also doing it on the defensive end. He's really good



defensively, and he's playing really well right now.

WENYEN GABRIEL: Shai makes a bunch of big plays for us. He controlled the offense. He has a ton of energy all over the court. Just show his leadership on the court, feeds off the rest of us, and we're just really proud of him.

Q. Kevin, how are you all able to pull this off without your best rebounder, Jarred Vanderbilt?

KEVIN KNOX: We just know how much he really wanted to play, and he really motivated us. Cal challenged some of us to step up and rebound and play with energy. A lot of us stepped up. Sacha played really well this whole tournament. P.J. played well. Wenyen played well. Everyone stepped up and tried to do something that Jarred couldn't. We wanted to win this for him because we know how much he really wanted to be on the court.

Q. For Wenyen and Kevin, you guys lost to Tennessee twice in the regular season. How good did it feel to win this one here against them?

WENYEN GABRIEL: Definitely felt good for us. I know that it was a big game for us. We got swept in the series this season. Obviously, that was on our mind. But we tried to play with a clear mind, play our hearts out. We were really trying to do this to get ready for the NCAA Tournament. Playing without Vanderbilt, we really had to dig in deep, and I know he was wishing he was on the court with us.

KEVIN KNOX: Tennessee is a really good team. They got us twice in the regular season. We knew this game we really wanted to get them back. We came out with energy from the start and went up with a huge lead. They made a run, and we just made some winning plays down the stretch. Next thing I know, we got the win. We really wanted this one as a team and individually because we know they got us twice during the regular season.

Q. It seems all season long people tried to make comparisons to this team, a 13, 14 team that had lost ten games in the regular season before going on to the national title game. Do you feel like that comparison is there or is it their expectations for these guys heading into the tournament?

JOHN CALIPARI: I don't try to compare teams. You

had Aaron and Andrew and Julius and James and Willie and Dakar. We had good guys. You're talking about a bunch of guys that are playing still.

This team, when you look at it, this is the youngest team that I've ever coached. The things that they go through and the stuff that I've got to talk to them about are more than just basketball. It's about how they think and how they respond, their self-discipline and trying to prepare them.

That team I had to, but we -- you know, Alex was on that team. We had some veteran guys that could talk to them.

And Wenyen and Sacha playing the way they are now, I'm just happy for them. They're all different. I knew this was going to be a tough deal. I knew that we really didn't know how to work. We didn't know how to be together. We didn't -- I had to change things on how we were playing. I guessed wrong. I wanted to do dribble drive. Nope, not with this team. This team is playing like my UMass teams. And so we had to do different things. We had injuries. We had Jarred, and now Jarred's not here.

But these kids have -- the biggest thing I want to tell you, great kids, and their parents let me coach them. They trust me with their child. So when you have that, you've got a chance, and they're good players. Obviously, we wouldn't have won this tournament.

Q. As Wenyen said, how they feed off the leadership of Shai, do you notice that from your vantage point on the court, and what does he mean to this team?

JOHN CALIPARI: Here's what he is. 7:00 in the morning, he'll go in and get shots up, goes to class. Never late for a class, doesn't miss. He then will come up and watch film with the coaches. He wants to know where his turnovers are, what he's got to do better, what do they say, so we can see it. Never misses a tutor. In the weight room, he's the best in the weight room. On the court, when we practice, he brings it every day. And he's blossomed because of it. What a great lesson for the rest of my players.

Do you wonder why he's doing what he's doing? He didn't come in as our best player. This is his approach. How about you? I'm tired. Excuse me? We think he's got a different body than you have. So these guys respect what he's doing.

Now, the other side of it is he's not been in this position much, where you're -- we're just putting the ball in his hands at times. He will miss guys sometimes, but he's gotten so much better. But it's taken film and practice and talks and one-on-ones. The kid is a great kid in

trying to do the right thing. These kids know, if a guy's -- it's hard to lead if you're not the hardest guy working it. It's hard to lead if you're not the first one in there. It's hard to lead if you're not a guy that's capable to go on the court and win games. I'm not following you. Who wants to follow you? I mean, you've got to be that guy.

And then he's never asked to be a leader. As a matter of fact, when we got the trophy, I said, who in the heck is our captains? I don't even know if we have captains. I think Kenny Payne is our captain. I don't know. I mean, we didn't -- I don't think we named captains. That's how young we are and how we didn't know who would be -- the trophy was there, and I go, Wenyen, you, Sacha, and Hami come up and take the trophy. But I'm happy for him. I'm happy for he and his family. Mom's a great lady. Raised her son right.

Q. John, do you feel about this team now going into the tournament in a way you wouldn't have felt possible maybe a month ago?

JOHN CALIPARI: A month ago, I wasn't sure we'd be in the tournament. And then I had to ask Dewayne Peevy, does everybody get to go to the SEC tournament? I wasn't even sure we'd get here.

But I come back to this. We needed to lose those games. We needed to lose four in a row. And by the end of them, we played pretty -- we had a couple of good halves, a couple of good games, and we still lost. When I got the text from one of the guys that said, Coach, we need you more than ever. When I got that text, I knew like, okay, we got this now. Now we're going to just start building.

And I defined roles very precisely and in public for every player to know what everybody's roles were on the team, and I said anybody got an issue? Because what we're doing is not working. This is how it's going to be. They were all fine with it. And we've all benefited.

But when we started winning and I saw how they react to winning and that they are crushed by losing, if you lose and you're okay with it and you're singing and dancing, I don't want to be near you. Don't come near me, don't come to my program, I'm not coaching you. But I also want you to take great joy in winning even if your performance wasn't great. And that's what this team has become.

I mean, P.J. easily could have been All Tournament the way he played. And he didn't say anything. He didn't care. We're going in. We're doing right. Now it's another tournament. Hopefully, I've tried to explain it. I've tried to tell him what it will be like, but they've never experienced it. Now all of a sudden, it's going to be

okay.

Q. John, just curious on your thoughts on where this performance puts you in terms of NCAA seeding?

JOHN CALIPARI: We'll probably get a 12 and play the play-in in Dayton (laughter). Is there a site in Anchorage?

Q. Coach, in the SEC, the most teams to come out of the SEC is six, projected to get more. How much damage can the league do? Do you think there will be more?

JOHN CALIPARI: This league will do damage. It's been doing damage. They just haven't let more teams in. We have teams borderline that should have advanced that didn't get in. Now we have eight teams in. I was saying eighth, and I was really hoping we could stick a ninth in.

What's happened is our strength of schedules have helped each other, and it's something we worked on league-wide. But you also got to win games. You've got to go outside and win games. We have. You also got to recruit so you got good enough players to win games, and we have.

There's no reason this league -- you know, the strength of the league, the strength of the television, financially, the universities, the academic institutions, we all represent are some of the best in the country. There's no reason -- everybody will tell me about football. I think they're done playing when we play. And I would use it as a positive like Rick Barnes has. Rick is one of the best coaches in the country. He's a great human being, but a great coach who's been in -- he was at Texas and did it there. Now he's at Tennessee. He uses football to his advantage. So it's an excuse, but if you, well, there's football -- no. That gives us an opportunity to go out and compete and get in Final Fours, which we have, and Elite Eight games and win national titles, which we have.

But I love the fact that it's eight. I love the fact that we can go on the road and lose a game and not go to the play-in game in Dayton. I mean, now you can lose a game. We lost eight games in our league. Eight. Most of them on the road, but we still lost eight. And you know what, we're still standing. This is how it's supposed to be. I've had to be in leagues where we've had to win 50 straight games or we would have been a 12 seed. You knew, if you lost a game, you're done. This is not the case now.

I'm proud of the league and the coaches that I compete with. I feel bad for Mark and Andy, who both of them will get jobs, and they'll get -- like I said to both of them,

you get a better job than the one you had. You'll be fine. You're talking about good coaches who are good people who you're putting your program in great hands in those guys.

But it's a good thing, and it's good for our league to have this kind of balance.