

John Calipari Memphis news conference transcript

Source: Memphis Commercial Appeal

The scene: Wednesday, April 1, 2009, Outside the gates of the Calipari house in East Memphis, just off the busy main street of Poplar Ave. Press conference started just past 1 and ended around 1:30.

Cal's opening statement: "Thank all of you for being here. For me and my family, this is the hardest decision. I've ever had to tackle. It wasn't about going to Kentucky that made it hard. It was about how do you leave a place that you feel so connected to, how do you leave people you truly love, how do you leave players who have give heart and soul to the city, to the program and to me personally. How do you do that?"

"What I told the players was that their dreams NBA, and all those things. My dream was to coach at Kentucky some day. The players when we had the individual meetings were unbelievable. There were some emotion, and guys were angry, but they weren't angry at me. They were angry that this was happening.

"A couple of them said, 'Coach, you've got to do this, you have to do this.' But let me tell you, that didn't make it any easier. We spent nine years here, and I've said it many times. This city and the people in this city have done way more for my family than my family has done for the city. But I hope we've added something good to a great place. I hope we've set a foundation, whether it's the program or anything around it, is better now

than it was nine years ago when we got here. I hope and pray that's the case.

"I know people are going to be angry. I understand (dog barks next door). But I hope over a period of time that people will understand that we absolutely loved it here. You have to know I had a lot of opportunities to leave here for more money than I was making, and I never did. If I stayed, I would have made more money here next year than at Kentucky. They asked me a hundred times, 'Can we pay you more, can we do more?' It had nothing to do with that."

(Cal pauses because he's starting to get emotional and walks back to his front door. Someone shouts, "Are you coming back?" and he holds up his right hand to say give me a minute. He goes inside and Ken Bennett, the team chaplain comes out and tells the media, "This is very hard for him, give him a minute.")

A couple of minutes later call comes back outside and apologized. He said he had to take a call.

Cal: "Questions, I'm not going to talk anymore.

Q: What about the recruits that you had lined up to come here?

Cal: "I hope they all stay here. At this point, I'm not allowed to have any contact with them. There are four signed players. I told (current) players that I talked to that 'I may do this, I may do that, but you're going to be one of the best players on this team if you stay. Why go

somewhere and sit out? Stay.' What I did when I talked to my team is to get everybody to stay."

Q: Did it help that Kentucky told you they made a mistake not hiring you two years ago?

Cal: "I've always said I was my wife's second choice, so none of that matters to me. It's still a great opportunity."

Q: When did you finally come to grips with it all and make a decision to take the job?

Cal: "What happened was is that I sat there and said, 'Will I be able to live with myself two or three years from now if I let this go?'

Q: Some people have said your leaving feels like a death. This is the front of the Daily Helmsman (the U of M student newspaper which had a picture of Calipari with the headline CXXXXX). What's your reaction to it?

Cal: "I just had a great relationship with those students. I imagine they are hurting and I accept that. I hope everything I did here was to make it a better situation for all the students. And that's understandable.

"The one thing I'll tell you is there is never a good time to leave. I will tell you it's better to leave when you're wanted than to be shoved out-of-town."

Q: Did you recommend some coaches as your replacement?

Cal: "All I did was to tell R.C. (Johnson) was that anybody you want me to call to talk about this job, please. I will call anybody and talk to any

coach. If there is a coach with any questions, I'll talk to anybody they want me to. Obviously, this is one of the great situations right now in college basketball."

Q: Who's the best fit for this team and this city?

Cal: "I'll let R.C. and those guys do their jobs. He's done a good job in his hirings and I would expect to be the same in this one."

Q: What's the future of the program in Memphis?

Cal: "It's bright. When you talk facilities, the commitment to the basketball program for what it does to the rest of the university, it's not changing. It's too important to the university and the city. The powers that be know that. I think it's going to be fine."

"Let me just tell you, again, the old guys in the donut shop. They are the best. One of them said, 'Coach, I want you to know when Bob Vannata, everybody thought this place would die and we were fine. When Gene Bartow left, everybody thought this place would die. And when you leave, they are going to think the same thing. And we'll see you back in Memphis sometime, like Gene and Bob.'

"Folks, I have as much emotion in this as anybody."

Q: How did coaching here for nine years resurrected your career?

Cal: "They gave me an opportunity. You can say resurrected. I got fired (by the NBA's Nets), so Memphis gave me the opportunity to coach.

"My hope is, again, that it is much better off than when I got here, that the nine years were well-spent for both parties. Again, I understand people being angry, upset and disappointed. Let me tell you this was a decision I made thinking 'I'm outta here.' I had to come to terms with what I would be feeling if I left."

Q: What about the charities that you worked with here? Will you still donate time and money?

Cal: "I'm going to try to. This city is special to me. I made a commitment to the YES Foundation, the Street Ministries. Money and time.

"You have to understand we spent nine years, almost a decade here. My children grew up here. Remember my first press conference? My son fell asleep and was three years old. He's now 12. This is Brad's home we're moving from his home."

Q: What would you share with the next coach about giving back to the community?

Cal: "The thing I'd say to any coach is that when you sit in that seat you have an obligation to bring people together. An obligation to gather people, not be holed up in that office in that practice facility.

"The position is you can go to Orange Mound and have lunch, then have dinner at the Memphis Country Club, then go to Germantown and sit down with friends. It is that kind of position.

“It is very important to this city. It is the position, not the person sitting in it.

“Who better brought this city together than Larry Finch? Who? You saying me? It’s not close. The position is important.”

Q: Describe the courting process with Kentucky?

Cal: “They put out feelers and said, ‘We would like to talk to you.’ My comment then was, ‘Let’s talk.’ Kentucky is one of those jobs I would have left for. I had other offers before and didn’t leave. I did the right thing. Now, I hope this is the right thing.”

Q: You could have created a hell of a program here. What’s the difference between here and Kentucky?

Cal: “Think about what I left. My whole career has been about not being afraid to take risks. The first risk was the UMass job when no one really wanted it. It was turned down by everybody, it’s a deadend for coaches, it’s a graveyard, don’t go there.

“The second risk I took was going to the NBA. That worked very well (he said faciously).

“The third risk I took was coming to Memphis. In the Mid-South, an Italian coming here? That was a risk. Now, I’m taking another risk.

Q: What about the talent you’re leaving behind?

Cal: “One of the reasons I was offered the Kentucky job was because of the talent that was here and how they played for us, how they played

for all of us. They gave me an opportunity to take this job.

"I don't take that lightly. Think about the players that are there, whether the recruits don't come or one comes. The program is fine. There's a group of people who are not going to let this program slip.

"I even told some players when I talked to them, 'This is good for you.' There were some players who didn't get the opportunity they think they should have gotten and I said, 'Now, you've got new life and I'm not here. So this could be good for you in the end. Don't look at it any other way.' Win the new coach offer.

Q: How much money did Memphis offer you to stay?

Cal: "If I would have asked for anything, they would have said yes. They approached me a month ago about more money and I told R.C., 'I don't want more money, I'm not accepting more money, not in this climate when you're laying off professors. You need to figure out how I can do something for the faculty senate to give money back to the professors.' He asked 50 times, 'Is there anything more I can do?' "

Q: Is it fair to say there are only four or five jobs you would have left Memphis for?

Cal: "Yes."

Q: Are you taking your staff with you?

Cal: "I'm in the process of talking to them."

Q: Any discussion from Kentucky officials about the verbals from 2010 and beyond?

Cal: "They've talked to me about it. I don't know most of the kids. I've got to go see them."

Q: Have you talked to kids that have committed to Memphis?

Cal: "I know hiring a new coach here, and him getting with those kids is important."

Q: What would you tell the next coach here?

Cal: "The city will embrace whoever is the next coach and that person needs to hug back, to get involved, to understand this is a different job. R.C. and the powers that be know that. I think it's going to be fine."

Q: What questions would you ask about the Memphis job if you were looking for a job?

Cal: "If I had been watching on TV and knew they had the practice facility and everything else, I'd say tell me. The league has gotten better."

Q: But the kids sign to play for the coach, don't they?

Cal: "That is true."

Q: What do you say to fans that you pretty much killed the basketball program?

Cal: No answer.

Q: Do you think most fans understand that is a business, you have been here nine years?

Cal: "The reason I tell Robert Dozier and Antonio put names in draft was to explore what was best for them. This year, I told Shawn Taggart in Arizona, 'You need to put your name (in the draft), work out, see what happens and move on from there.' It's similar to me listening to what Kentucky had to say. They know that."

Q: How long did you talk to Rick Pitino and was it overblown?

Cal: "Five to 10 minutes and yeah."

Q: What was the theme of all the UK coaches you talked with?

Cal: "That they wouldn't give up their time there for anything in the world."

Q: Did you advise Tyreke (Evans) on testing the draft?

Cal: "Yes, but that's between and his family. The reason is he went from not on the page to 'uh-oh, lottery.' If he's a lottery pick, he has to consider it. Maybe he chooses to come back."

Q: Could there be a time when you look back here and say, 'What if I would have kept that recruiting class together?'

Cal: "Believe me, that went through my mind."

Q: Can you describe what it has been like for you emotionally and physically the last 72 hours?

Cal: "I'm physically drained, emotion as you could tell. You don't sleep. You don't eat. You're making a decision and you have a great thing going. Unbelievable relationships with people. I've met friends here that will be friends for life."

“But there’s this thing out there that you’ve always dreamed about doing, a place that you’ve always dreamed about, not knowing if you’d ever get the opportunity.

And you say, ‘It came in the wrong year.’ Okay, maybe it did. Now what? That’s in a nutshell. I met with the (U of M) president yesterday and I got emotional.

“This is the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through. Nothing to do with going to Kentucky. That was easy. It was how do you part ways here? There’s not an easy way.

“Folks, I appreciate you being here. This program will go on. It will stay at that level. They will hire a great coach. You have to be thinking positive thoughts. You can’t be doubting.

“I’m going into a new situation and that’s what I’m going to have to say. Exactly the same thing.

“I’m telling all the people here who have been great to me and my family, thank you. People out there that love us, I love you.

“My heart will always be here, at least a piece of it. I’ve got to get on and try and get things done and try and get Kentucky back where it’s supposed to be.

“They went and said in an international study that the hardest job in all of sports is coaching Kentucky basketball. That’s what I stepped in to. But you know what? I was invigorated this morning. I’m tired right now, but I was excited about the opportunity.”

“I brought three different shades of blue with me to this thing because I didn’t know which one was which.”

Q: When will Memphis see Kentucky on the schedule?

Cal: “You know, we have to do that. . .in about a decade.

Q: When will you move for good?

Cal: “My kids are still in school. I’ll be going back and forth from here to Lexington for a couple of months. I’ll be with my friends.”

Q: Does the next coach here need to be well-known?

Cal: “It needs to be somebody who connects and understand what the city is all about. They’ll do something great. They’ll get a heck of a coach.”