

# CBS Sports Classic

Saturday, December 23, 2017

## Steve Alford

## Aaron Holiday

UCLA Bruins

UCLA - 83

Kentucky - 75

STEVE ALFORD: Really super proud of our guys. They've obviously have been through a lot with travel. Nobody in the country's traveled more than we have. Nobody's had the distractions we have had. And yet these guys have just really stayed close together and they have just continued to grow. And that's really what November and December is about is trying to grow.

We had Michigan, on the road, in our first true road game and we let that one go, but we played well. We have been playing better. I thought today we really put it together. We had a lot thrown at us. A lot of different man defenses thrown at us and coverages thrown at us and then some zone. And I thought our offense really handled that well. And then I was really pleased with our defense. I thought we did a great job on the backboard, we limited second opportunities and that was critical. We did the same thing at Michigan. These teams that really pride themselves on board play, we have done a really good job on the backboards. And that's pretty important moving forward.

So great time for a couple-day break, hopefully our guys can travel safe. And the guy to my right was awfully big down the stretch and proved just kind of the quality of player that he is. So very happy about this performance.

**Q. Aaron, can you talk about the poise you guys showed down the stretch and maybe the Michigan game helped you guys in a way to close this one out?**

AARON HOLIDAY: Yeah, we showed great poise. I think at the end of the game it was like maybe two minutes left and all I kept saying was we got 30 seconds, so we just got to take care of the ball and run the shot clock all the way down and we'll be in good shape, so that's what we did. Obviously, the Michigan game didn't end how we wanted it to. I'm the main reason because I turned the ball over so many times. I had seven tonight, too, but I'm just glad we got the win.



**Q. How special is this for you to be in this building. I know you watched your brother play in this game, but how special was it for you?**

AARON HOLIDAY: It's always special. When you can play where your brother's played. Obviously he's doing really well right now, so that's good. But just to get the win out here, it's just awesome to say.

**Q. Aaron, what does this win mean for you guys just given everything you guys have been through this season?**

AARON HOLIDAY: It means a lot. First off, it shows that we can win even though we're young. Second off, it shows that we're actually good. I'm tired of people saying that we're not good just because we have mishaps at the end or whatever it is. So it just shows our team chemistry and how good we are right now at a young age.

**Q. Aaron, what was the key, as coach said, to handle the travel, to handle the distractions? What got you guys through it?**

AARON HOLIDAY: Man, I couldn't tell you that, man. We just stayed focused throughout our entire games, all the games we played, we just said focus. Coach did a great job of letting us know what we were going to do beforehand and just keeping us ready at every game and every moment.

**Q. Aaron, was this one that you circled on the calendar given that Jrue played here in town before the season? Do you look forward to being able to play in the same city as your brother?**

AARON HOLIDAY: Yeah, I would rather him be at the game, but, obviously, he's playing right now so he couldn't do that. But it's a game. I come out and play hard every night, that's really all I can do.

**Q. You guys made some defensive adjustments to the zone late in the first half, kind of helped pack it in on them. How does that help you guys?**

AARON HOLIDAY: We just, again, coach drew up a good game plan and we just stuck to it. Obviously, we had our game plan coming in and we executed it very well on the defensive end and that's how we got the win.

**Q. As things got tight down the stretch and the crowd got loud, what was your mentality as you**

**guys started trying to make plays down the stretch?**

AARON HOLIDAY: Just to calm down. Obviously, we got rushed up a little bit toward the end. I had some weird turnovers, just giving them the ball. But just to calm down and stay poised. Coach kept preaching to us, all our teammates kept preaching it to us, so that's really what we had to do.

**Q. What do you think the key was for your guys handling the travel, handling all the distractions?**

STEVE ALFORD: Well, just growing as a basketball team and we were always preaching control what you can control, whether that's noise on the outside like Aaron is talking about, the noise if we're not very good. They have just controlled that on the inside. They haven't believed that one second, they have just continued to work to get better. Then you have the distraction of, what's happened to the teammates and what's going on here, and he mentioned it. Don't forget you got, it's UCLA and academics at UCLA is top of the food chain. So it's not -- it's the most applied university in the world. So it's for a reason. We're at a high, high level academically. So when we're going through finals and we're going through the midterms, even midterms, that was in China, so we're taking midterms in China. So we got a lot going on and yet through all that travel, we practiced for five weeks, thinking we were going to have 11 guys in that rotation. And overnight it goes to eight. Those guys really handled it. And the China thing too, I think sometimes it gets overlooked is what it does to the rest of your schedule. The rest of the schedule was already put in place, so it really crunches what you do. We haven't had that time that a lot of teams here during the break have had a week or 10 days to really practice and work on things. We haven't had that window because China took the entire first week of the opening of college basketball. So our schedule got crunched together. We even lost a game due to the fires in Los Angeles.

So we have had a lot going, a lot to be thrown at these guys, and five of the eight didn't play last year, and yet we just are seeing great growth. And as a coach that's just what you want to see. We're a better basketball team now than we were in the first of November. And that's what you want to see. I like where we're at at break, I like where we're at going into league play. It doesn't mean wins, but I like the demeanor of this team and now we got to be able to handle success moving forward, beating very good basketball team, how we handle that success now opening things up against Washington State's going to be a key.

**Q. Aaron has an obviously very strong belief in this team, but do you think it's important for the freshmen to see that you can beat a team of the**

**caliber of Kentucky?**

STEVE ALFORD: Absolutely. And we have been showing them clips, man, a lot about last year, especially offensively. When our ball has been stagnant and we have held it, we tried to show them clips of this year versus last year's team of how that ball moved. This is an elite shot blocking team. We wanted to drive and kick, not drive and try to finish. I don't know how many blocks they ended up with, they had one at half. I thought we did a really good job of not challenging the shot blockers. We enticed it and then we wanted to kick out and guys made open looks. So it's things like that that we have been showing them on tape of last year's team. Now it's good for them to see that, that you know what, we can win a game like this too. So not just the freshmen, man, I think also Alex and Prince who have been a part of our teams, but they haven't played. And so now those guys that haven't been a part of it, there's a sense of it now that they can grab onto that we got a chance that if we keep growing we could be pretty good.

**Q. How valuable is a guy like Aaron, especially down the stretch when it's crunch time?**

STEVE ALFORD: He's unbelievable. I've said all along he's like that pit bull, he just will come at you. I loved coaching him, these have been three great years. You are looking at a freshman, we had one team as a freshman, we missed the tournament, and he started every game. The next game or next year, sophomore year, we have a great recruiting class. He doesn't start, comes off the bench and in my mind, there wasn't a better player off the bench last year than Aaron Holiday. His numbers all went up and now boom here in year three now he's thrust into, hey, you've got five new guys that you got to lead. And the guys from last year are gone and he's just handling it tremendous. It doesn't matter what you throw at him he just gives you everything he's got. And that's the thing I appreciate about Aaron. And he, actually, for the first time in his career, asked me to give him a blow. And to me that's maturity too. Because he's always been on that stubborn side, which I've always liked, but tonight he actually asked for a blow and we got him out for about a crucial minute 45, two minutes there in the second half. And he came back in and just he finished the game the way he's capable of finishing.

**Q. Talk about the significance of New Orleans winning a National Championship here. You're back here --**

STEVE ALFORD: I like this city. I like this city a lot. But it's been good. It's been good to me anyway. It was great. I had no idea that this arena was right next to the dome, the Superdome. So when we came here on Friday for practice, I took a nice shot of the Superdome and then sent it out to a lot of my '87 teammates. And so great memories. We stayed at the

Hilton on the river, I remember that. It was cold. I remember winning the National Championship in '87 and trying to get to Bourbon Street for the celebration. It was freezing here at that time. So the weather's a little bit better this time. But we have been fortunate that when we have come to this city some good things have happened. So it's a place I like playing basketball in.

The South Dakota game was just a few days ago where we gave up 24 in four minutes, so those things can get back in if you're not tough. I was very happy to see our guys respond in the tough way. We made free throws down the stretch, we did what we needed to do, we didn't turn the ball over, and I thought we got a key stop there twice, two out of three times we got two key stops.

**Q. Kris had more points at halftime than he'd had in the previous five games. In the whole game, he seemed very excited all game. What do you think allowed him to get that?**

STEVE ALFORD: I think he's maturing too. And a lot of it is realizing how good you are. Sometimes you get knocked down a little bit and then you start questioning yourself. And that's something we have always been battling with GG. I think GG's really good. I think he's our -- arguably our best defender, he's a great position, he made a huge steal on a baseline drive where they're trying to run a baseline drive with a baseline drift, he gets a huge steal for us, he's always in the right place at the right time. And with him it's just about believing how good you are. Sometimes when you're young and you have gone through a tough stretch, you start questioning yourself. I thought over the break here -- and I thought Kris started to do some things in the South Dakota game. He's a really good cutter, and I think he got into a habit early in the season where all of his points were in transition. And now after there's a lot of tapes out, people take away your transition, you've got to be able to perform at half court. And I thought he was really good tonight. He's a special player.

I thought Jaylen Hands was really good tonight. I thought that's the most controlled and best decision making that I've seen Jaylen Hands make. And Prince responded -- after a tough first half, Prince responded with a big second half.

**Q. It seemed like the momentum went back and forth in the game like a tennis match. Was that youth do you think on both sides?**

STEVE ALFORD: Well you got a lot of young players playing, that's for sure. I loved our start to the game. I loved our start to the second half. Those are always crucial things for us. In fact I like the finish too. I like the last five minutes the first five of each half and the last five of each half I like. Because we started well, and then they took a lead, they got back and took ahead and then last five we were able to get it back and get to a tie. And then we started the second half really well, got up nine, 10 points and then they made a run. And then we made another run. Then we were able to finish. It's not an easy team to finish because they are long and athletic and things can seep back in.