

# From UNC to Arizona, Caleb Love has persevered. Is a big March Madness ahead?



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TUCSON, Ariz. — Caleb Love still hears the boos.

The Arizona guard still sees the comments, the cruel messages, the vicious critiques of his game, the stuff he says can “really mess with your confidence.” For years he wanted, desperately, to be embraced by fans. Instead, he got pushed away.

His mom sees and hears the hate, too. Alecia Thompson could not believe the first time she sat in the stands and listened to strangers hurl insults at her baby boy.

“I have a thick skin now,” she told The Athletic. “But when it initially started I was like, ‘Oh, my God, are you seriously yelling that at someone’s child?!’ It really did bother me.”

Before, they both would have responded. But five years into Love’s college career, which will come to a close over the next few weeks during his final NCAA

Tournament, they say they've grown up together, better understanding how to block out the noise and lean into the embrace of people who matter.

Love's polarizing roller-coaster college basketball career has included the highest of highs, like when the McDonald's All-American from St. Louis led North Carolina to the NCAA title game as a sophomore. But he's also experienced the lowest of lows, like when UNC essentially shoved him into the transfer portal after a rough junior season. His streakiness — the ability to take over a game or miss every open look — snowballed into high-profile scrutiny. He was supposed to be a one-and-done player — and he wasn't.

But on the eve of his March Madness finale, as the fourth-seeded Arizona Wildcats prepare to play 13th-seeded Akron on Friday, the senior Wildcats guard is grateful for everything. Even the bad stuff.

"I'm proud of myself that I kept going," Love said. "With the spotlight I had coming into college, a lot of people would have folded. I stayed true to who I am, I kept my faith. At the end of the day, I'm so blessed. Not many players get to play in March or win a game. I got to play in the national championship — do you know how many guys dream of that? All of that, it keeps me sane and at peace."

Before Arizona traveled to Iowa State on March 1, Wildcats coach Tommy Lloyd was asked about the reception he expected Love to receive. The Cyclones and their fans were surely not going to extend a warm welcome to the player whose half-court buzzer-beater Jan. 27 led to an 86-75 overtime win for Arizona.

Was Lloyd worried? The fourth-year UA coach snorted.

"Do you know how much that kid's been booed in his life?" Lloyd said.

His point: Love hasn't just been jeered by opposing crowds, but also by his own fans. At this point, it's hard to make him flinch.

Love struggled his freshman season at UNC, taking bad shots and missing them, shooting just 32 percent from the field and 27 percent from 3. He got hot at the right time as a sophomore, exploding for 30 points in the 2022 Sweet 16. His 28 points — 22 in the second half — in the national semifinal catapulted UNC to the title game and ended the career of legendary Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski. Carolina lost to Kansas in the championship, but Love seemed poised for a big junior season.

Instead, the Tar Heels sputtered, going from preseason No. 1 to missing the NCAA Tournament altogether. Carolina fans went after the team, and Love specifically, on social media, aiming their vitriol at the player who had a reputation for jacking bad shots with no consequence. At the end of the season, Love had missed more 3s (171) than his teammates had made, combined (161). He finished with a career low in assists and hit just 30 percent of his 3-point attempts, a significant drop-off from his sophomore year when he shot 36 percent.

Through it all Love spent a lot of time — too much time, he says now — on social media.

“The more you read it, the more it seeps into your brain,” Love said. “My freshman year, because of COVID, there wasn’t much else to do but be on social media. And we didn’t have fans at games, there was no crowd cheering you on. The only way you could get any sort of feedback was to look online.”

He got addicted quickly. But as the Heels faded, Love couldn’t shake the negative comments. Was he really that bad of a player as people said? Was he selfish? Overrated?

“Growing up, I never played with fear or doubt,” he said. “I never had that until I got to college. And it shakes you.”

By the time he entered the transfer portal in spring 2023, Love’s confidence had spiraled.

Thompson doesn’t think it’s right to say that Love’s spirit was broken when he arrived in Tucson. But she video calls her son every day, and it was evident he was not in a good place. She encouraged Love to lean into whatever God had planned for him, even if it wasn’t what any of them saw coming.

“When it took a turn — and it wasn’t just about Caleb, they were going after the entire UNC team — I talked to him about, your real fans are in your circle. Those are the people who don’t waver,” Thompson said. “It’s great to have external fans online. But when you don’t play well they think you’re the worst player in basketball. There is no middle ground for people like that. We talked a lot about understanding what is real and what’s not real.”

Lloyd, often described as the ultimate players' coach, helped. He supported Love, held him accountable and told him he had plenty of basketball left.

“It’s OK to not meet expectations,” Lloyd said. “It doesn’t mean you’re a failure. What’s sad to me is the weird way our society can celebrate someone not meeting those expectations. The person who all those negative thoughts are pointed toward, it impacts them. Whose life should be defined by what they do between 18 and 23? No one.”

At Arizona last season, Love won Pac-12 player of the year and All-America honors, leading the Wildcats in scoring (18 ppg) and 3-pointers made (92). But in the NCAA Tournament, he went cold, shooting a miserable 5-of-18, including 0-for-9 from 3, in No. 2-seeded Arizona’s upset loss to No. 6-seeded Clemson in the Sweet 16.

His scoring is down a smidge this season (16.6 ppg), though he still leads the team. His growth on the court is most evident in his decision-making, both in shot selection and passing — his turnovers are down considerably — but also in his ability to self-correct.

His freshman and sophomore year, he acknowledged with a wry smile, someone would usually have to tell (yell at) him and “maybe I was a little defensive.”

Now he craves constructive feedback. After scoring 23 points on 7-of-15 shooting against Utah on Feb. 26, Love went home and immediately watched film, noting the three or four shots he’d forced. The next day at practice, he harped on how “I need to be more efficient.”



Love didn’t need some sort of special pep talk from Lloyd going into the postseason.

“All I told him was, let’s go for it,” Lloyd said. “But what does going for it look like? It looks like trusting your habits. You don’t need to try to one-up yourself.”

A key to Love’s growth and maturity this season has been Brett Ledbetter, a performance coach who’s worked with

athletes such as NBA star Trae Young and NFL quarterback Anthony Richardson. WNBA All-Star Sabrina Ionescu calls Ledbetter “my thinking partner.”

Ledbetter’s advice has mostly revolved around body language. His biggest reminder to Love: showing joy isn’t a weakness. It’s OK to smile on the floor and remember how much you like playing this game.

“I’ve learned my smile is contagious, and the player and person that I am, that feeds into my teammates,” Love said. The Wildcats agree. When Love plays as he did against Utah, forward Carter Bryant said “it feels like we’re unstoppable.”

Together, Love and Ledbetter have studied Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, one of Love’s favorite players and the front-runner for NBA MVP.

“If you watch Shai, he always keeps the same face,” Love said. “He’s steady, he’s stoic and he’s their leader. His emotions are always in check, and he stays calm in all situations — I can take something from that.”

They talk about where to funnel energy, too. As recently as the first half of this season, Love acknowledged, he would sometimes bark back at fans. Ledbetter helped him refocus.

“What I understand now is, why am I wasting my energy? I should be putting that energy into my teammates, not fans,” Love said. “Even talking trash on the floor, I’ve tried to stop that. Because if we get into a s---talking battle, are we gonna get into a one-on-one battle on the court, too? I don’t need to do that.”

Thompson, too, who never misses a game, sits in the stands now and takes a deep breath.

“I just tell myself, anything that takes away from your peace is a distraction,” she said. “And that place over there, where that fan is yelling, that is not a peaceful place.”

Love’s favorite memories are not of game highlights but off the floor. Shortly after arriving in Arizona in summer 2023, the team traveled to Abu Dhabi for a tour. Yes, they played games. But Love absorbed the museum trips and elaborate meal spreads, talking and laughing with the guys.

Those bonds were strengthened in summer 2024 when Love rounded up teammates three to four times a week to go bowling. (His retirement plan, whenever he's done with basketball, is to open bowling alleys so he can spend all day enjoying his second-favorite sport.)

At best, Love is predicted as a late second-round pick in the 2025 NBA Draft, though some mock drafts don't include him at all. ESPN analyst Fran Fraschilla, who's called a handful of Arizona games this season, recently wrote on social media that though Love's shot selection and accuracy can still get better, "there are not 60 better NBA prospects."

Love said he's not deterred. Nine-time All-Star Damian Lillard is Love's favorite NBA player, mostly because Lillard "doesn't let others define him."

Love entered college in an era of digital-first — and because of COVID-19, digital-only — communication. What he's realized after five years is that nothing tops in person. He still has his social media accounts, and part of him still cares. But he doesn't spend nearly that much time looking at them. He'd rather be around his family and teammates.

When Love hit the half-court shot against Iowa State to force overtime, he went berserk, sprinting around the floor in jubilation. What he didn't realize, which Ledbetter told him later, is that in doing so he ran away from his teammates.

He needs to lean into their embrace. After all, that's what he's always wanted. "When it happens next time — and I do believe there's going to be a next time — I need to stand there," he said, "and let my team mob me."